

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School

2006

Shooter's flinch and other stories

Dan Brooks

The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Brooks, Dan, "Shooter's flinch and other stories" (2006). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 3545.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/3545>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.



**Maureen and Mike
MANSFIELD LIBRARY**

The University of
Montana

Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

****Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature****

Yes, I grant permission

☒

No, I do not grant permission

☐

Author's Signature:

Date:

5/24/2006

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author's explicit consent.

THE SHOOTER'S FLINCH
AND OTHER STORIES

by Dan Brooks

B.A. University of Iowa, 2000

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

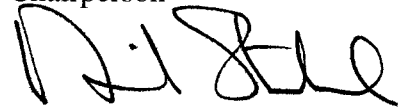
The University of Montana

May 2006

Approved by:



Chairperson



Dean, Graduate School

5-26-06

Date

UMI Number: EP34919

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI EP34919

Published by ProQuest LLC (2012). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE SHOOTER’S FLINCH	1
IDEA OF A HAMMER	21
THE OFF SWITCH	39
DES MOINES YOU FILIPINO GIRLS	53
ALL THESE THINGS I DO, I DO FOR LOVE	74

THE SHOOTER'S FLINCH

When he was seventeen Dean Johns broke four hundred ninety-eight of five hundred clays to win the National Trap Championship. Clay fifty-six came out of the house at a hard right angle and Dean swung left and lost it. He tracked across the field with both eyes open, breathing through his teeth until he found clay fifty-six and lay the bead over it. He led it smoothly to the top of its arc, the apogee hang, out into the field and down steady until it settled in the grass. He did not fire.

Pros call it the shooter's flinch. A twelve gauge kicks and you get to tightening your arm when you pull the trigger, anticipating the recoil. There is a rhythm to trap and tensing up is part of it—aim, tighten, fire. You can pull a hundred clays like that without realizing you're getting scared to shoot, until you go to pull the trigger and you don't. You flinch. It happens to everyone.

When Dean tells the story now he pauses after the flinch, for suspense. He lets people think that flinching on clay fifty-six at the National Trap Championship was the worst thing that could have happened. At the time, it was.

Everybody in Des Moines knows that Dean Johns is a goddamn murderous insurance man. The old guys—the boys in Toastmasters and at Baker’s Cafeteria, the smokers—they tell the college kids to learn something from Dean Johns.

In the insurance industry everybody starts in sales and works his way up to management. The problem is that almost nobody is good at both. You’ve got your Nice Guys: your talkers, always smiling, a different handshake depending on how old you are. Those are the guys who sell policy—the ones who can tell a story, who can get through a ninety-minute pitch without reminding you of your banker. Then you’ve got your Hardasses: thick guys who show up pissed and worried-looking at the office Christmas party, soda water guys. They’re the ones ought to be managers. You can’t have a Nice Guy running the office. That’s how you get a Sales Goal instead of a quota. That’s how they wound up with the thirty-hour week at Hawkeye Securities, and did anybody over at Hawkeye get a bonus this year?

But a Hardass can’t sell policy. You can’t sit down at a kitchen table in Keokuk and tell some old cob that if he doesn’t buy \$50,000 in Crop Hail then come Monday he’s gonna wear his ass for a hat. Nobody gets a slice of peach cobbler that way. So the Nice Guys can’t manage and the Hardasses never sell enough policy to get there, and everybody works his way up or down to the level where he is least suited to be. In this way the whole industry is broken.

But Dean Johns had Farmer's Mutual up twelve and a half percent last quarter. Six of it—that's half their increase—was him, Dean Johns out pushing Crop Hail in Osceola and Centerville and What Cheer. The other six was Dean Johns kicking ass at home, running the old guys and the college kids up and down the hallways like this was the last year the feds were going to let them sell policy. It was a goddamn miracle what he did over there and everybody got paid.

On Thursday afternoon Dean goes to Baker's Cafeteria for lunch. Lussem is there with the other old guys at the round table in the back and Dean goes and sits down. There's this kid with them, sitting next to Lussem, twisting his wedding ring.

"Do you know who this is?" Lussem says to the kid.

"This is Dean Johns," one of the old guys says.

"Nice to meet you," the kid says.

He holds out his hand across the table and Lussem slaps it. Dean can't believe it—slaps the kid right across the back of his hand like to stop him sticking his finger in Dean's mashed potatoes.

"Don't shake his hand," Lussem belches. "Say nice to meet you or shake his hand, but don't do both. He's not your father-in-law."

"It's nice to meet you," the kid says. He appears to be wearing someone else's jacket. The ring is platinum, not a mark on it.

One of the old guys says the kid could work for Dean Johns someday, he doesn't cock up. He tells him about the twelve and a half percent.

"Dean Johns has it figured out," Lussem says. He winks, broadly. "You meet Dean Johns, you think he's a Nice Guy. There's people thought that for years."

“Right until,” the other old guy says. He punches his hand. “Bang.”

The old guys laugh like sewing machines. Lussem is shaking up and down, crying almost with his hair completely still, coughing into his handkerchief. Dean holds out his hand to the kid.

“I forgot your name,” Dean says.

“Ted,” the kid says. “Ted VanDeventer.”

Dean gives him the fast-and-loose handshake, the one that says he would have been born after 1975, too, if he didn’t have so goddamn much to do. He asks Ted how long he’s been married. They cover real estate and Valley High School football before lunch is over, and afterwards Lussem buttonholes Dean in the coatroom. Between the coatroom and the door Lussem’s nephew Ted becomes Dean’s Friday, 4:30.

Dean thinks about people. He tries to understand them because it’s good business and just something a man should do as part of living, probably. He has a system worked out for interviews. On Friday he takes clay fifty-six out of his desk drawer and sets it on the shelf behind him on a little snapshot easel. When Ted gets there he tells him about the national trap championship, up to the flinch.

“I thought that was it,” Dean says. “You don’t miss that early.” Ted looks nervous and Dean takes off his glasses and sets them on the desk, which is a signal of informality. The kid seems to relax a little. “I thought okay,” Dean says. “I choked but I’m at Nationals, so shoot the rest and enjoy myself.”

He missed again at clay three hundred forty-nine. He tried to break it right out of the house and went over top of it—*pull bang suck* and then the hiss of the serrated rim of

the clay whipping the air out into the field. The *suck* was the people behind him, watching.

“Trap is like golf,” Dean says. “We’re all better with nobody watching.”

Ted smiles, nodding, which is a typical nervous response. If they were at a convention or somewhere with an open bar, Dean would have said *It’s a real bitch with a hundred people behind you*. But golf always: trap is like golf.

Dean scratches his face like he’s forgotten what he was saying. Give the kid a chance to interrupt him, talk about golf if he wants. When Dean was a kid he and Wendell and Harker used to break golf balls with a twenty gauge. Wendell would drive one and Dean would shoot over his head—try to catch it quick off the tee before the pattern got too wide. The plastic skin would blow back on them like sand and Harker would yell “Fire in the hole!” all three of them ducking and giggling their asses off, watching lights come on across the fairway. This was before they put up a fence around Des Moines Golf.

“So you missed that one,” Ted says. “Then what happened?”

It’s what most people say. What happens next is obvious from the beginning of the story: Dean broke four ninety-eight of five hundred and he’s already missed two, so now the other hundred and fifty-one are going to get broken. But almost everybody asks anyway, for what Dean figures to be three possible reasons.

Hopefully, Ted is asking because he’s smart. He remembers the beginning of the story and he’s done the math, but he’s asking because he knows Dean wants to finish the story. If Ted thinks like that then he can learn to sell insurance. But it’s more likely that he doesn’t remember the beginning of the story. He wasn’t listening at first but now—

since Dean is a good storyteller, a good public speaker who can see what people like and give them more of that—Ted is hooked and he wants to know how things come out. The majority of people are like that: lazy, but willing to get involved if you give them a reason.

It's also possible, of course, that Ted VanDeventer remembers four ninety-eight of five hundred and he knows that Dean has already missed two and he honestly can't think of what could happen next. He's dying to find out. If that's the way Ted is it could take six months of low-level fuckups for Dean to know it for sure, and then another year to fire him. This is why you interview people.

What happened next was the trap boy pulled another hundred fifty-one clays and Dean broke every single one of them in rhythm at the top of its arc—that place where it hangs for a second without moving up or down, just away in the same direction as the shot, and then it cracks like a pane of glass. The other shooters came out of their rounds to watch him. They leaned on their cars and whistled low whenever he powdered one and then they were quiet again in the heat as Dean reloaded, the locusts lowing, breathing through their mouths. When he broke clay five hundred the referee called *round* and Dean set the butt of his gun on his foot. He looked out at the field, the orange and black flakes between the reeds and purple vetch, and he tried to find clay fifty-six. He wanted to go out there and get it but there was another shooter behind him, so he went to the clubhouse and got a Pepsi and waited.

As he tells the story to Ted now Dean waited alone, because it's simpler that way. Really Wendell was there with him. They drove to Nashville in Wendell's car because Dean's wouldn't make the trip. Wendell wanted to see Nationals anyway. He got the

Pepsis and they both sat on the hood of his car watching the rounds, holding still while the other shooters broke clays and taking a drink when they missed. How Dean got to Nashville isn't important to the story.

At the end of the day the next closest guy had shot four eighty-one. They gave Dean a trophy four feet tall and a red GTO convertible. Wendell sold his car in Nashville and they drove him in the GTO, Winchester with the Monte Carlo stock sitting up between them on the front seat, clay fifty-six in the glove compartment. They wouldn't let Dean run track his senior year because of the car. The Iowa High School Athletics Commission said it made him a professional athlete. You could smoke the tires on that mother in third gear and Dean drove it until he got married.

"Is that clay fifty-six?" Ted says. Dean gives it to him and Ted holds it in both hands, turning it over to where *Winchester: Missouri* is printed in raised letters on the back. "How do you know this is the right one?" he says.

"It was the worst flinch of my life," Dean says. "I could close my eyes right now and see where it landed."

"There were a lot of clays out there, though," Ted says. "Nineteen from the guy who got second, and more than that from everybody else." He hands the clay back to Dean.

"This is clay fifty-six," Dean says. He gives Ted his back as he returns it to its easel. Then he steps around the desk to shake Ted's hand, which is the universal sign that the meeting is over. But Ted lingers.

"Do you hunt, then?" he asks.

“Not for years,” Dean says. The kid looks worried. He’s probably caught up in his own head to what he said about clay fifty-six and now he’s studying Dean. Maybe he’s trying to gauge whether Dean thinks hunting is unsophisticated, cruel. It’s unusual these days for a kid from West Des Moines to hunt—not like when Dean went to school and guys would come to Valley in the morning with an over-under in the trunk, drive out McKinley and pull over when they saw pheasants in the brown fields.

“When don’t we go hunting this weekend?” Ted says. He shifts his jaw sideways and Dean can hear the click. “My uncle says I should make friends with you.”

It’s gutsy, at least. Saying that he’s asking for a reason doesn’t make it any less true, though, and Ted VanDeventer has recently called Dean a liar. It was probably by accident, which is worse. Dean is already on his way home.

“I’m busy this weekend,” he says. “But thank you.” He squeezes Ted’s hand hard for a second before he relaxes to firm: The Handshake, the one that tells people he means it. *Nothing is real to you*, he thinks. *That has been clay fifty-six for longer than you have been alive.*

Lussem is supposed to pick him up. Ted waits in the waiting room until 5:30. When he can’t raise Lussem on the office phone Dean offers him a ride. They walk through the parking lot in silence, Ted a half step behind Dean, apparently smart enough to know when he’s fucked up.

They drive west through West Des Moines. Boarding houses and pizzerias give way to strip malls and radial apartment complexes that used to be fields. The one Ted lives in is called Buck’s Run.

“I hate it out here,” he says. “This is just until my wife finishes school.” The way he says it suggests that he got married for a reason. His wife is in Nebraska, at Lincoln.

“I used to live in one of these,” Dean says. They pass over another viaduct that breaks, for a second, the chain of gray frame buildings. “Not out here, of course. And they painted them all brown, then.”

He tells Ted about before he was married, when he was getting his bachelor’s at Drake and Susan Jane was at Mizzou. He used to drive down to Columbia every Friday afternoon and bring her back to Des Moines for the weekend. They’d stop for gas in northern Missouri, some town where everybody spent Friday night in the parking lot of the Amoco. Dean came out of the Friendly Service in Kahoka one night and Susan Jane was sitting in the GTO with all the doors locked. She was crying. There was a green Charger at the other pump with four teenage boys in it, looking at him.

Apparently one of them had said something about her tits. Susan Jane told him while they sat in the GTO with the engine off, Dean’s hands flat on the dashboard as he watched the kids watch him from inside the Charger. When Susan Jane was done talking he reached across her and popped the trunk. He got out of the GTO and went around back and got the tire iron. He shut the trunk and stood there for a second, listening to the locusts. Then he walked over to the Charger and busted out one of the headlights.

The kids went nuts but they didn’t get out. Dean held the tire iron above his head and they swore at him and spit against the inside of the windshield. He broke out the other headlight and hit the windshield a few times before he went around the back and did the tail lights. He stomped on the exhaust pipe until it came loose and then he walked up the driver’s side and chopped at the mirror until it fell into the gravel. He did the door

handles, the antenna, the kids in the car screaming as he went around to the front again and pried off the grill. He flung it behind him and it skittered into the dark at the edge of the parking lot.

Dean put the tire iron back into the trunk of the GTO. He drove through town to the highway with Suzan Jane turned away from him, staring out the window.

“She wouldn’t say a word to me the whole way home,” Dean says.

Ted points to Buck’s Run and they turn in. Dean stops the car in front of building Four, of six.

“Look at this,” Ted says.

He takes a snapshot out of his wallet. It’s him and a girl in front of Mount Rushmore, right in the middle of the frame at an awkward distance from the camera: some stranger’s idea of how to take a picture. Ted and the girl are a little blurry—in motion turning to each other, mouths open, their heads canted.

“We told him to count to three,” Ted says. In the picture their lips are barely separated, with a sliver of Mount Rushmore between them. Ted folds it up and puts it back in his wallet. “Give me a call if you change your mind about hunting,” he says.

Dean drives past Susan Jane’s house on the way home. None of the lights are on and he doesn’t slow down. He keeps going down the block, pulls into his garage and shuts the door. He sits in the car for a second and listens to the engine tick under the hood. They were married twenty-eight years.

The light on the garage door opener clicks off and Dean waits for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. He wishes the Kahoka story were true. He would have done it.

He imagines himself standing over the Charger with the tire iron, the close spring Missouri night, Susan Jane smiling secretly in the GTO.

Harker calls at exactly seven o'clock. Dean is watching television with the cordless sitting next to him on the couch, and it surprises him when it rings.

"I wanna go dancing," Harker says. He says it like he's never been dancing in his life and he just realized there might be something more. "It's Friday night and we should go out and dance with women."

"When have you ever seen me dance?" Dean says.

"That's the beauty of it," Harker says. "I dance for five minutes and then I get tired. I gotta sit down and drink more beer." That stand-up comedian inflection Harker picked up from cable—Dean never recognized it until after the divorce, when he got cable, too. "I've seen you drink beer," Harker says.

"All right," Dean says. "Where are we going?"

"Johnny's Vets," Harker says. "We're going to Johnny's Vets."

Dean picks him up and they drive out 35th Street, to EP True Parkway and the streets they cut through to Railroad. All the trees are tied on either side to metal posts and there is no grass in the parkways—just shallow piles of dirt between the sidewalks and the curb.

"Remember when this was Engle's farm?" Harker says.

"Giles' farm," Dean says. "Denny Giles used to live out here."

“Last year I dated a woman who lived out here,” Harker says. “I used to wake up here sometimes.” He laughs. “There was a black guy lived right next door to her—one of these big houses out here. Can you believe that?”

“I believe it,” Dean says. “That’s something I can believe.” Harker the cop, collecting racist jokes at work and trotting them out at night to see how people react. Maybe he buys it and maybe not. A row of identical gray townhouses stutters past the window like a flipbook.

“Deer,” Harker says.

Dean coasts to a stop in the middle of the block. There are three of them, a buck and two does. Dean shuts off the headlights and the buck looks through the windshield at him and Harker. Harker puts up his hands like he’s holding a rifle, both eyes open.

“Bang,” he whispers.

A light comes on up the street and the buck bounds away, up onto the muddy parkway and across a lawn in sewing-needle strokes, catches up the does and he is gone. Dean peers past the reach of his headlights into the darkness for a second before he drives forward again, to Railroad in silence with Harker, a right across the tracks and through the cement factory parking lots to the back of Johnny’s Vets.

“This is a Mexican club now,” Harker says. He looks at Dean like he might reasonably start the car again.

“It’s not Johnny’s Vets anymore?” Dean says.

“It’s the Latin King,” Harker says. “I’m serious, you’ve never seen so many Mexicans in your life.”

“Okay,” Dean says. “A lot of Mexicans.”

“It’s different,” Harker says. “The women like to dance, though.”

They go inside and sit at a table on the edge of the dance floor. A waitress with dyed black hair brings them a pitcher of Michelob, nodding at Harker.

“What do you think?” Harker says.

“Reminds me of Johnny’s Vets,” Dean says.

He tries to remember what was here then and what is new. The bar is the same, although it looks like they’ve refinished it and maybe put a new rail along the bottom. Dean watches the Mexicans come off the dance floor. One drums his fingertips in the spills on top of the bar, flicking beer at the bartender as she hustles by. He orders his drinks and turn to watch the dance floor again, elbows up behind him, checking out the booths and the women and the older men. He looks about the way Dean did when he was seventeen, rolling anxious into Johnny’s Vets on Friday night with Harker and Wendell.

The weekend Dean got back from Nationals they all came here—Dean with Susan Jane and Harker, then Wendell late with Susan Kaye. The men played pool where the dance floor is now and Susan Jane and Susan Kaye sat in a booth and smoked cigarettes. Dean was about to break the second game when Harker pointed to the booth.

A guy about their age had sat down with the Susans. As he talked he took Susan Kaye’s cigarette out of her hand, had a drag and put it back. Susan Kaye said something and the guy looked at the pool table. He stood up from the booth and walked over to Wendell with his thumbs in his belt loops.

“She says you wouldn’t like that,” the guy said.

“Like what?” Wendell said. Harker walked past Dean and around to the other side of the table, passing his hand over the felt.

“You wouldn’t like me smoking her cigarette,” the guy said. His bobbed his chin up and down when he talked, his hair rigid. “That’s what she said.”

“I don’t like her smoking her cigarettes,” Wendell said. He smiled at the guy, that farmboy smile they all still had—shy, crazy. “Of course, I still fuck her.”

The guy didn’t say anything. People didn’t talk like that then—not to strangers, at least. Wendell made it a point, of course, to talk like that all the time.

“Boy,” he said. “Just think how hard I’m about to fuck you.”

The guy put his hands up and Harker came around the pool table, fast. He reach around the guy’s shoulders, from behind him, and hit him in the mouth with the cue ball. There was a popping sound like when you drop a light bulb and Harker kept his arm around the guy’s neck as he fell. He let him down behind the pool table where the bartender couldn’t see and he kicked him twice before Wendell pushed him off. Then Susan Kaye was between them, hitting Harker with her open hand and turning to Wendell with her lips pressed together before she turned back and hit Harker again. She was crying. Harker kept saying “What’d I do?” looking at Dean as Susan Kaye hit him, the three of them arguing with each other and stepping over the guy on the floor as they went back and forth.

That was before Wendell died, buried alive laying a water main on the south side. That was before Susan Kaye went into real estate and got married again, then again, getting richer and skinnier and still swearing and drinking vermouth like she did when she was seventeen and trying to get Wendell to take her to dinner.

A woman about forty comes over and puts her hand on Harker’s shoulder. He lets her lead him onto the dance floor, where he plods right and left in front of her in a big

man's manual salsa. When the song ends he kisses the woman on the cheek and sits down with Dean again.

"I'm not a cop anymore," he says.

It's a long explanation and Harker moves through it sideways, something about department politics and whose nephew is whose, getting seen by the wrong guy using excessive force. He tells it without making eye contact, looking over Dean's shoulder at the booths along the wall.

"Anyway I bought this tractor-trailer rig," Harker says. "I'm gonna be a trucker." He laughs. "It's a beautiful rig," he says. Then, quickly, "They're trying to screw me on the insurance."

Dean ballparks the premium on an over-the-road trucker driving a used rig for the first time in his life at age fifty. Harker tells him what he has to spend and Dean shakes his head.

"You set the premiums, right?" Harker says. "You're the boss. The boss makes it cost whatever."

"The auditor would find it," Dean says. "The auditor tells the Board and that's my ass."

"No audit until the end of the year, though," Harker says. "A year's all I need."

"I can't do it," Dean says. The music stops and Harker runs his finger around the rim of his glass until it starts again.

"On the force when we needed to do something that wasn't strictly according to regulations," he says, "we'd have the new guy do it. You don't know the rules, you can't break the rules." He pours what's left of the pitcher into Dean's glass.

“Maybe you got a new guy can sign the papers,” Harker says. Dean looks at the dance floor and tries to picture the place where the kid was lying.

“Do you remember when we were here and you popped that kid with the cue ball?” he says.

“I remember that,” Harker says.

“What happened to that kid?” Dean says. “What did we do with him?”

“Didn’t you and Wendell take him out back?” Harker says.

“I don’t think so,” Dean says. “I think I would remember that.”

“I always thought you and Wendell took him out back,” Harker says. He gets up and goes to the bar to refill their pitcher. Dean watches the woman who danced with Harker do a fast meringue with one of the Mexicans. Harker comes back looking worried, scared.

“That wasn’t true what I said about the black guy,” he says. “On the way out here—that woman didn’t have a black guy lived next door to her.” He is quiet for a long time, drinking his beer. “I don’t know why I said that,” Harker says.

They finish the pitcher without saying much. Dean drops Harker off and drives home. He calls Ted VanDeventer, apologizes for the lateness of the hour, and tells him it turns out he can go hunting after all.

Not even dawn the next morning, just the blue east to warn the drunks, and Dean is driving to Ted VanDeventer’s place. *VanDeventer*, he says to himself. *VanDeventer*. It’s a weird name and Ted will probably be listening for Dean to screw it up. People have been stumbling in the middle of VanDeventer Ted’s whole life.

Dean parks in front of Ted's building and gets the Browning out of the trunk. He rings the buzzer and reads the names on the panel while he waits. *Garrison. Krugler. Lanning.* Nothing Dean recognizes. Ted gets to the door in less time than it would take somebody to put on his shoes.

They're taking Ted's truck. He starts the engine and leaves it in park, holding his hands between his legs while the heater warms up. There is a cooler behind the driver's seat.

"So normally I have a couple of beers when I go hunting," Ted says. He looks straight ahead.

"I think that's appropriate," Dean says. He reaches behind the seat and gets a Pabst for Ted and one for himself. He hasn't sat in a car with a beer since he was nineteen.

They drive out Railroad to 63rd Street, the bridge over the Raccoon River. There's a service road on the other side of the bridge and Ted slithers the truck down the ungraded dirt, steering with one hand as he sips his beer. They park at a flat spot near the river and get the guns out of the back. Dean checked his before he left and he sits on the front bumper while Ted fiddles with the bolt of his Remington by the tailgate. He is attaching his sight when he looks up the river and sees the deer.

There are three of them—a buck and two does—and for a second Dean thinks they are the same ones from the night before. But the buck has a bigger rack and the does are grayer around the stomach, their fur bitten and rubbed off at the shoulders. They pick their way along the bank toward the truck. Dean knocks quietly against the quarter panel and Ted stops checking his gun and holds still. Dean slips his half-attached sight off its

bezel and lays it on the hood of the truck. He stands and rests the butt of his gun on his foot.

The deer come slowly, stopping to pull at reeds along the bank and then walking again. Dean breathes through his nose until he can hear their hooves punching down into the frosted leaves. They just have legs, he thinks, no feet but bare spots where the bone comes through. They are maybe thirty yards away now and Dean raises his gun.

They take off immediately, running at an angle from the river, straight past the truck and toward the woods. The buck is in front and Dean lays the bead of his rifle over the spot just behind its shoulder. He pictures the heart, twisting and relaxing as the buck pushes off into the air and reaches for the ground again. Dean follows the heart, turning slowly, tracking it as the buck runs. He imagines the sound of its breathing.

He means to pull the trigger each time the buck's front legs touch the ground. He tries once and breathes and tries again before it reaches the woods. He tracks it still, the bead bobbing up and down with the heart. He tries to fire again as the buck passes between two trees.

"Bang," he whispers. The gun stays silent and the deer are gone.

Dean puts his hands in the pockets of his vest and looks at the place where they disappeared into the woods. There used to be a farm out there, past the trees on the other side of the road, where Dean and Wendell used to go shoot bottles with a .22. That water main is buried out there somewhere, too, maybe a mile from where Dean is standing. When the ditch collapsed on Wendell the other plumbers were afraid to use the backhoe to get him out, so they dug him up with shovels. It took seven minutes. When Dean went to see him in the hospital there were cuts from the shovels all over his face. He lay

in a coma five days before he died. Dean curls and uncurls his trigger finger in the pocket of his vest. If he were a younger man, he thinks, he would probably cry.

He walks back to the where Ted is leaning on the fender of the truck. “Too early,” Dean says. “They were city deer anyway.” They hunt the rest of the morning, and Dean waits until Ted takes a medium-sized buck to offer him the job.

They used to be blue-collar. Dean’s old man was a dairy farmer before he went into insurance. Wendell was a plumber like his dad and Harker a cop and then jail and then a cop again. They used to go to Johnny’s Vets every Friday night wearing the same clothes, their hair wet against the backs of their necks. They cottoned no bullshit at all.

Susan Kaye used to wear her jeans so tight she had to walk by turning on the balls of her feet. She’d wear through a pair of shoes every month and when she got her paycheck the first thing she’d do was buy a couple black strappy pumps with icepicks for heels. You could hear her when she walked into the bar, grinding the soles against the floor *hccccchk hccccchk hccccchk* like somebody planing down a cinder block. Wendell would look up right in the middle of a story. He’d stand up from the booth without saying anything and stay standing until Susan Kaye sat down.

About a year before Wendell died he and Susan Kaye bought a house on 5th Street. They had this dog, a huge Doberman named Strider. You’d come into their house and Strider would be running laps around the living room, knocking shit off the walls and bumping into chairs, Susan Kaye screaming at him and Wendell laughing his ass off and shouting “Strider, *no!*” periodically.

Dean and Suzan Jane were over there one Friday night and on about the third pass by Suzan Jane on the sofa Strider took a nip at her. Wendell jumped out of his chair and tackled him. He had Strider by the neck in the center of the living room, his hand clamped around his mouth and trying to sit on him, and Strider wriggled out and took hold of Wendell's arm. The two of them rolled around on the floor, Wendell punching the dog in the side of the head and Strider growling and shaking his arm, while Susan Kaye screamed at them both. Right in the middle of it Wendell looked up at Dean and he was smiling. He had Strider in a headlock and he looked at Dean and smiled like this was the best thing in the world, this was finally all right.

After Wendell died Susan Kaye couldn't get Strider out of the back yard. He was running around back there growling and barking and when you went to look at him he'd hit the door like he was going to come through and murder everything. Susan Kaye called Dean and he came over with the Browning. Strider wouldn't let him into the back yard so finally Dean just shot him from the kitchen window. He sat with Susan Kaye afterwards and drank a beer. He told her the Kahoka story, the tire iron and the Charger.

"Jesus," Susan Kaye said. She cried then and Dean waited with her until she stopped. He drank his beer and looked down the hall at her shoes by the front door, lying on their sides with big white scuff marks ground into the soles.

IDEA OF A HAMMER

Me and Caleb was down to the creek hitting frogs with a hammer—you know, just hitting them. Middle Brother Creek runs right back of Caleb's house and there's a wide spot got frogs in it like a pestilence. Least it did, until Caleb and me discovered The Idea.

The Idea is this: if you take a claw hammer and you hit a frog in exactly the right spot—I ain't saying where that is—his tongue shoots out maybe fourteen inches and his eyeballs fire off out his head in opposite directions. Also, he shits his own kidneys. No kidding, he shits them right out his ass. And you got not to laugh, which is hard, but if you stay dead quiet and listen you can hear his eyeballs plunk down in the sand on either side of you, *fft fft* at exactly the same time. That's how you know you done it right—*fft fft* like tapioca in an ashtray. It's only if you hit him perfect.

That morning we was at Youth Speaks Christ Listens and when Pastor Galen started in about Moses and the Pharaoh it was all I could do not to light out of there and

run get the hammer. I figured Pastor Galen talking about that on Sunday was like to be a sign. Caleb was thinking the same thing, I could tell, because of how he was fidgeting around on his hands and also our connection. Caleb and me always think the same thing. Right then we was thinking that God was sending us a message and He was saying, “Today is My day. Go ye unto the creek and wallop the shit out of every frog I place before thee and await further instructions.” God takes an interest in frogs. What’d He use with Moses and the Pharaoh, and then what’d He do to all them Egyptians?

We run all the way from First Assembly and in a minute I was lining up a fat one, right down to the edge of the water and I ain’t even took off my slacks. There was dark spots spreading at the knees of them, like my church slacks was some kind of plant drank up water from the sand. I was thinking about not thinking about that so it wouldn’t distract me. You got to concentrate and you got to get close. Say you want to hit that frog but you don’t want to get wet—say you try to hit him from arm’s length and then what happens? His head busts open like an eggshell and there is like a clear slime on the rock, but don’t the eyeballs go nowhere and it’s the eyeballs make it count. Everybody wants to go to heaven but nobody wants to die. You didn’t want no sand on your church pants and now you got to give the hammer to Caleb on account of you fucked up.

“Don’t fuck up,” Caleb said. I looked past the hammer and the frog was pale and sharp on the rock again. The wind blew and I watched the reflection of the tree branches beat flat and curved to the top of the water.

“I ain’t going to fuck up,” I said.

Caleb said mind you don't and he spit in the creek—upstream, which I want to make a rule about. I think it nerves up the frogs. Caleb thinks so, too, which is why he does it, but there ain't no rule so he's allowed.

"You ever make it with yourself?" Caleb said. His forehead was wrinkled up and already he'd got dirt on it. Caleb's a hard thinker.

"You mean like jerk off?" I said.

"Yeah," Caleb said. "You ever done that?"

Caleb ain't stupid. Before Youth Speaks Christ Listens I was in the bathroom at his house and I found one of Janet's Kools taped to the back of the toilet. I was supposed to be changing into my church slacks but instead what I did was I found this Kool and I turned on the fan and leaned up against the sink and I smoked it. That was wrong. But what's worse is I got to thinking about Janet and how could the sink was up against my stomach, and then I thought about what it would be like to make it with her and I jerked off right there in the toilet. As soon as I finished I felt guilty. Even before I pulled up my slacks I wished I hadn't done it and that is proof how wrong it was. The Kool was bad enough but I'm the only one hurt by it. The worse sin was thinking about making it with Caleb's sister, which she probably wouldn't want to do so that is basically rape. And both of these sins I done in the bathroom of my best friend's house. I felt so bad about them that I wasn't even sure I remembered to flush the toilet, and what was Caleb's mother going to do when she came home from Fellowship and found her toilet full of matchsticks and cum?

Caleb ain't stupid and he could see what I done.

"I jerked off once," I said. "But I decided not to do it again."

“I never done it,” Caleb said.

“You never jerked off or you never come?” I said.

“I come,” Caleb said. “I come all the time.”

“How you come all the time you never jerk off?” I said.

“Dreams,” Caleb said. “I have dreams about making it with girls.”

I didn’t have dreams about making it with girls but that was probably because I was jerking off all the time. Once you get into a meanness it is hard to get out.

“Yeah,” I said. “Well, I’m on quit.” I can’t look at him when he knows me like this and I acted like I was gone back to lining up my frog. Really I was just watching my pants drink up water from the sand and thinking about the meanness I done in the house of my best friend.

“I’m a quit, too,” Caleb said, and he laughed short and loud the way he does. He picked up a rock and wung it down the creek and it hit a branch somewhere sounded old and dry. “How many is that?”

“What’s the count,” I said, “or how many is this one going to be?”

“The count,” he said.

I said seven. “This one’s going to be eight,” I said.

“Less you miss,” Caleb said.

“I ain’t,” I said. “I’m on bust this fat sumbitch.”

Factually he weren’t even that big as frogs go but you look at any of them long enough and you start to hate him. Caleb and me disagree about which is the right frogs to hit. He thinks you ought to pick a slow one, which that’s good thinking and he done well by it but it’s also started to work against him. We have used up most of the slow frogs at

this point. But something more important than that, even, is I think there's some frogs in the creek deserve to get hit more than others. It is a proven fact that Caleb is better at The Idea than me. But I figure if I can find the frogs what deserve it I got a better chance of hitting them right, because then I'm not just doing The Idea—then I'm The Idea as it's getting done. That means I got to think which frogs need hitting.

There was Caleb's shadow down under the water on the sand. The water striders skated up to the edge of it but didn't never touch, each one of them with three little shadows of his own around each of his own feet. I'd got distracted and I went back to lining up my frog.

There was moss up his spine. That meant he was old, and his hands were turned in so far they was almost pointed backwards. That's what made me hate him the most. I read in a book that what it is about a frog's hands is he's got suction cups, and the reason for that is so he can hold on to the girl frog while he's making it with her. The girl frog usually doesn't want to make it and she's trying to get away the whole time. The more a frog's hands turn in like that the better he is at hanging on to the girl frogs while he's raping them. My frog shuffled his little carny hands on the rock like he was nervous but he didn't know why. Get ready, boy, I thought. There is going to be a reckoning.

“You gonna start jerking off?” Caleb said.

The frog twitched and for a second I thought he was going to hop away, but then he settled down on his ankles and started in to breathing fast and steady like frogs do. You pick a frog and he hops away you going to pick another one, but that first frog is still there even after you forgot. A frog is alive all day and not just when you're looking at him. When you are asleep his is down to the creek with his belly in and out of the water

breathing, and when you're lining up another frog he is out there still, eating fireflies and making it with girl frogs. Everything he does get stored up inside him somewhere. But when you crack him open it's just moon-shape bones and a shine on the rocks. I brung the hammer down perfect and the skull was flat and thick out to one side like an arrowhead. The eyeballs was gone. I shut my eyes and listened to them come down in the sand behind me, *fft-fft* like a wasp switching his wings.

"Bang," I said. The stream took them kidneys over the rocks. Right out his ass, I swear.

"Nuh-uh," Caleb said. "They didn't land the same time." He was shaking his head and I wished he'd stop. I hit it good.

"They're never gonna land exactly the same time," I said.

"They could," Caleb said. That's a poor argument and he looked away from me a second but then he looked back even harder. He was set.

"When you got the record didn't even one pair land exactly the same time," I said. The world record was nine. Caleb was the world record holder with nine frogs in a row hit perfect to make their eyeballs shoot out and land at the same time. About the same time. Even perfect ain't perfect.

"Two things can't happen simultaneous," I said.

Caleb screwed up his face. "Simultaneous?" he said.

I wasn't trying to be uppity but that was an uppity thing to say, and for what? To try and put myself up above him. I'm careful but then it just jumps out of me sometimes.

"I'm just saying," I said. "Nothing happens exactly the same time."

Which was even worse. Caleb's face turned purple almost and he looked like he was trying to remember where he seen me before.

"What about The Idea?" He said it real quiet.

That was true. Caleb and me thought of The Idea at exactly the same time, and maybe I brought it up first but you ask either of us and we'll say we started thinking about it together. That's how we knew it was important, like one day we both just got to wondering that what if there was something to hitting a frog with a hammer? What if it wasn't just something you'd do once or twice but like a skill? There's only one place an idea like that could come from and it weren't just neither of us. In the Bible they got the furnace. They got the three in the furnace and it weren't none of their idea to go in there, I bet. But He was making them into something. He had a plan in the back of His mind and He put them three into the furnace to make the plan from them. Me and Caleb just took it into our heads simultaneous, that maybe there was something important that put a reason to—heck, that about forced us into trying it once, just blasting one of them little fuckers with a claw hammer to see if what we were both thinking was right. That's what we did and it *was* right. You need proof all you got to do is come to the creek and watch Caleb put the hammer down and hear the eyeballs *fft fft* like sparks struck off into the water.

"That's right," I said. "That's true, because we thought of The Idea at exactly the same time."

"Okay," Caleb said. He was opening and closing his fist like that was pumping the purple out his face. "I think they landed close enough to count. They weren't exact, though."

“All right,” I said. “I can agree with that.”

The first of the frogs drug up onto the sand a ways down the creek. Generally the sound of the hammer sends them all off into the water but they come back soon enough.

“We ought to make a rule about how close they land,” Caleb said.

“We got a rule,” I said. “They got to land together.”

“Yeah but nothing happens—” he rubbed his forehead and I could tell he was looking for it. Simultaneous, I thought. You know it. “Nothing happens at right the same time,” Caleb said.

“Okay so close enough,” I said. “What’s close enough, then?”

“Give me the hammer,” Caleb said. He held out his hand. “I’ll show you.”

“You on give it back?” I said. Caleb jerked back his hand like I burned him. And what kind of question was that?

“I’ll give it back,” he said. His voice was quiet, disappointed like I weren’t going to give it to him and it was the worst feeling in the world. My own friend I talked to like that. “I just want to show you.”

I held out the hammer and I was glad when Caleb took it.

He went careful into the creek, wide-stepping to get behind that first frog come up on the sand, watching his ripples. They know what a ripple means. Caleb hunkered down with his chin almost touching the water, lining up his frog, and he raised the hammer but at the same time he moved just a little closer to him. That was a mistake and the water from his moving washed up on the sand and the frog jumped away right when Caleb was trying to hit him. That’s the worst thing can happen. When a frog hops away

his leg is the last part of him to leave, and what's going to happen when you bring the hammer down right where his leg is stretched out like that?

Caleb stood up quick and looked away. The frog pushed himself around in a circle with his dead leg drug behind him like a chain. It left a spiral trail in the sand. Caleb held out the hammer to me and still he did not look. When this happens I am the one who puts an end to it because Caleb cannot. It takes a hard heart to kill and Caleb ain't got it. I do.

I turned the hammer sideways so I had the whole head to do it with. The worst thing in the world is if you don't do it on the first try. Then it was over and I put my foot under the frog and flipped him away as far as I could down the creek.

"Jesus," Caleb said. He kept swallowing and I tried not to think about how the creek looks going around and around from a deeper circle in the sand. They other frogs was still on the rocks, perfect like whipped cream. I couldn't recollect how many I'd hit. I asked Caleb and he was quiet a second.

"I don't know," he said. He rubbed his forehead. "How many you think it is?"

"I figure it's seven," I said. But I weren't for sure.

Caleb said nuh-uh and there was no way it's more than six. I was supposed to know because I was the one hitting but I didn't. I pointed to the dark spots on the rocks.

"There's at least six right there," I said. "Plus the ones that's washed away."

"Some of them are from yesterday," Caleb said. He was right, too. Caleb got five in a row day before, which weren't the record but it was pretty good.

"Yeah," I said. "Some of those are from yesterday." Caleb moved his lips and studied from rock to rock. He looked worried and he kept touching the back of his neck.

“Maybe it’s seven, though,” he said. “Maybe I can’t remember right.”

His hand was still on the back of his neck and he looked at me like somebody hit him he didn’t know where from. He looked scared. He was trying to put it together in his head and I could see how the pieces was just kept from him.

“It’s probably seven,” he said. He looked down the wash but most of they bodies was took away by the creek. There was only the one with the broken leg. “I hurt that one,” Caleb said.

This wasn’t fair. There was something wrong with this and it wasn’t fair to Caleb or me neither, because say I hit four more? Then we’d know I broke the record either I just hit six frogs or seven, but we wouldn’t know if the record was eleven or ten. Then we’d have to go through it again every time we hit frogs. I could see it the way Caleb was looking at the creek and there it was worse when he looked back to me. The whole summer and The Idea become one long argument.

“What we got here is disputable circumstances,” I said.

“Yeah,” Caleb said.

“I say it’s seven and you say it’s six, so that’s disputable circumstances, right there.”

“It works, though,” Caleb said. He was trying to be good about it, because he *is* good. “You hit four more that’s the record, either way.”

“You worried about the record?” I said.

“No.” Caleb cracked his knuckles.

“All right,” I said. “How about we say this one ain’t for the record, on account of the disputable circumstances.”

“Okay,” Caleb said. He looked relieved and I felt like I done right for once. Still though, if the count was seven I was getting gypped. Not for myself I was thinking that, but Caleb wouldn’t want me gypped neither if he knew. I thought that for myself too, I guess, but for both of us. There is what’s right, after all. I said to Caleb that still six was a lot.

“Or seven,” he said. “You hit them good.”

“So let’s say—” but I caught myself. “Thank you, Caleb,” I said. “Let’s say this ain’t for the record—on account of the disputable circumstances—and instead this one,” I pointed to a couple of the slower-looking frogs with the hammer, “these next two are for something else.”

“Them two?” Caleb said. He figured them and I could tell something come into his mind already.

“Any two,” I said. “Probably those ones.”

“Let’s make a bet,” Caleb said. “I’ll bet you twenty-five dollars.”

I couldn’t figure where Caleb would get twenty-five dollars, him with no job and his mother not any better suited than mine. But he said he’d got it Easter money from his grandma. I said I didn’t have no twenty-five dollars and Caleb said that’s all right I could owe him when I missed. I said I weren’t gonna miss. I said what good was a bet if there weren’t no money and he screwed up his face again.

“I got twenty-five dollars,” he said. “I got it right with me.”

I could tell he was waiting on me to ask him to show it. But I weren’t entirely mean still and I kept my mouth shut. Caleb is my friend. He tells me something and I can’t believe it then what am I? We shook and his hand was warm and dry.

“You miss either one of them you got to give me twenty-five dollars,” Caleb said.

“I know that,” I said. “That’s what a bet is. But if I hit them, though.”

I looked at the two frogs and tried to figure which one was uglier. They both looked like damp sin to me. Frogs all want the same thing—bugs, mainly, and to stay out the sun. Does that mean you ought to pick a frog that’s in a sunbeam because that’s something wrong with him and maybe it’s wrong all the way through? Or is he right enough he don’t care if he’s in the sun or not, since he can jump out whenever he pleases? Say you got a skinny one and you figure he been denied his daily bread on account of some meanness. But maybe he just ain’t got the heart to eat them bugs the other ones will eat, and in fact that’s the best frog in the whole creek right there. Maybe that’s the best frog there ever was or maybe that thinness is a curse upon him. He’s got that inside him somewhere and the only way to know is to crack him open.

One of them was pale. He was like a pear weren’t ripe yet and there was veins curled up his back from under his belly. I figured maybe whatever’s inside him was packed tighter and it’d shoot out better. I held the hammer over him and tried to see three lines, the two eyes and the top of his spine. They made an inside-out triangle and that’s where I wanted to hit him. Where the lines come together there was a low spot and it looked soft and curved like the hammer would fit in perfect.

He blinked his eyes one at a time the way frogs do—sucked one down into his head and covered it over and then he squeezed it out again. I felt good and I knew I was going to hit him right.

“Here comes Janet,” Caleb said. I bet he thought I would miss when he said that but I didn’t even try to hit. I stood up and put the hammer behind my back.

Janet was sliding crabwise down the bank with her shoes in one hand and a can of beer in the other. Halfway down she threw the shoes at Caleb so she could grab at the roots and not fall, and all the while her itching the side of her neck with the beer can. She was panting like she run all the way here from somewhere that's on fire.

"Caleb," she said. "You got to loan me twenty dollars."

"Where'd you get that?" Caleb said.

"Refrigerator," Janet said. "It's the last one." She turned the can upside down and shook it over her tongue. I looked away quick and I tried not to think about the meanness I did her earlier.

"You ain't supposed to drink beer," Caleb said.

"Eff you, Caleb," Janet said. "I'm eighteen I do what I want." She crumpled up the can and throwed it in the creek. Then she set to scratching her neck again. There weren't nothing there to itch her that I could see. "You got twenty dollars or what?" she said.

"What you need that for?" Caleb said.

"Mind your own dang business," she said. Janet had a problem with substances. There was a billboard on Highway 38 with her picture on it, says how much she wished she never got involved with substances. They made her set in the basement of First Assembly Wednesday nights and read pamphlets about it and probably her picture was in the pamphlets, too.

"What are you looking at?" she said to me. Jesus, she was mean. Her face was all puffy and her eyes covered up into slits. Caleb says they're hazel but they looked about the color of transmission fluid to me.

“Nothing,” I said.

“How come you’re always over here?” Janet said. “What are you two queerbaits doing, you always down to the crick?”

“Hitting frogs with a hammer,” I said. I held the hammer out to her, headfirst with the skin hanging off it. Janet looked at it for a second and then she turned her head and puked. She puked right there in front of us like somebody turned on a tap. It run down the bank behind her.

“Jesus,” Caleb said. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m sick,” Janet said. “I need twenty dollars go into town.”

She had the twenty-dollar sick all right. The beer was still foaming in her puke and she kept rubbing the top of her foot against the sand, like digging a hole. Already her toes was tore up and red. But Caleb saw all this and what did he say?

“I ain’t got twenty dollars,” is what Caleb said. His own sister cranksick and begging him, and he tells her he ain’t got nothing on account of our bet. That’s The Idea and the power of it and me and Caleb had it together.

“Even if he did,” I said, “he wouldn’t give it to you.”

“Then what good are—” Janet said, but then she stopped. Her whole neck turned red and she took a step toward Caleb. “Bull,” she said, quiet like to start a prayer.

“Serious,” Caleb said. He looked at me and I know I done it to him and I looked away at the frogs. There was puke around their little front arms like they was floating in chicken soup. “I ain’t—” Caleb said, and then she was on him.

She didn’t knock him down the first try. All she really done was jump up in the air and come down in the same space as him. Her fingernails was mostly bit off but she

clawed him anyway and pulled the skin down under his eyes like Caleb was crying. He stepped back on a loose rock and she followed down on top of him as he fell, her hand on his chest and she'd got her knee into his groin when they landed. She hit him then—just once and light like to try it out.

“Honest,” Caleb shouted. “I ain’t got it.”

“Bull,” Janet said. That was it for her and she laid into hitting him for real. She set sideways on top of him and kept putting that right hand down, leaning into it and pulling up again like she was starting a lawn mower, and Caleb calling out he didn’t have it. The he kind of coughed and went quiet. After that it was like she’d got tired and she held her hand over his face and just pushed it into him every few seconds, like mashing him with her fist. She was going to grind her hand off hitting him.

“Don’t you do that,” I said. I dropped the hammer in the creek and I went toward her. “Don’t do that.”

For a couple seconds I got her half tackled and one of her arms held under her. But she was bigger than me. She throwed me over in the sand next to her and popped me in the ear.

“You little some gun,” she said. I couldn’t hear out the one ear and she sounded fake in the half quiet. I got one foot up under me before she punched me in the neck and I was back on my butt. The she dug her feet in the sand and come forward, just shot her whole body at me like a dog. She got me right in the chest and I fell back into the creek. I could hear splashing down into the water around me like they was falling out the sky. Janet sat on my hips and she slapped me once, twice across the mouth.

“You SOB,” she said. There was a little bit of blood on her neck in the shape of a arrowhead or like a bird’s wing and then she laid her hand over my face and pushed me underwater.

It was quiet and cold and I couldn’t hear nothing except for the water. Janet was like a funhouse mirror over me and there was the swish-and-spit of the frogs kicking their feet to swim away. Then I was up again and the air was hot and I breathed hard around Janet’s hand clamped over my face.

Her fingers smelled like Kools.

She pushed me under again and I tried to think about how cold the water was but I could still feel it happening. I thought, I’ll do anything. I’ll be any kind of good, I thought, you take away anything you want, even The Idea, just don’t let that happen now. I thought of the meanness I done that morning and it just happened worse.

Janet took her hand off my face and her eyes got big for a second. There was the yellow and the pear green centers, for a second and then they dropped away and was just two like cuts in her puffy face.

“You little perv,” she said.

She smiled and there was nothing in it but meanness. I felt a little sick and there was like a burning in back of my throat. “You like this?” Janet said. She moved her hips and then she hooked her ankles over my shins. “You little sicko?”

“I don’t,” I said, and I tried to push her off. But I couldn’t make it go away and she caught hold of my hands and pushed them down into the creek.

“You little queer,” she said. “You little faggot.” She looked down the creek away from me a second like she been distracted by something but still she wouldn’t stop

doing it. I thought about frogs. I thought about their little hands and their eyeballs sucking down into their heads and I pulled myself as far away from her as I could down into the sand at the bottom of the creek. I thought about how many pieces of sand there was total and two times two is four and four fours is sixteen and Jesus, what's sixteen times sixteen? Janet's dog teeth was forward a little over her fronts.

"Little perv," she said. She hook her head and slapped me across the face before she reached into my pants. I tried to grab her arm away but she had me. One hard twist and pull and it hurt like fire and I made it right there in my pants. I couldn't stop it.

Janet let go and punched me square in the mouth. I pushed on my teeth with my tongue and I cold feel the strings pull and snap. Janet stood up and went to where Caleb was curled up in a ball. She didn't even hit him. She turned him over on his face and pulled all four of his pockets inside-out and there weren't nothing there.

"What good are you, then?" she said. She picked up her shows and throwed them over the bank and then she climbed up after them and was gone.

Spend the whole afternoon lining up frogs. Stare each one down until he ain't a frog but only two eyes and the top of a spine, that inside-out triangle and the bones like they under a blanket. Then the bones until they are just high places either side of where the water goes , with the soft low places pushing it and out, moving it, and then only see brown and yellow and green with dark places and light, the whole creek and the frogs in it just a marking out of shadow and sun. You look at every frog in the creek until he becomes only that, all afternoon every day, and when you close your eyes you will see nothing but frogs everywhere and you won't recognize them. I lied on my back in the

creek and shut my eyes while the tree limbs blew back and forth in front of the sun. I watched the red and black spots behind my eyes breathe a second and then hop away.

When I sat up Caleb was setting on his hands in the sand with his back to me. His shirt was torn across the back and there was blood on him but not a lot. He stood up and looked over the back where Janet had gone, up on his tiptoes with his pockets hanging out his pants like in the cartoons.

“Good thing she didn’t look in your shoe,” I said.

It was a second before he started stuffing his pockets back in. He said yeah but it was like he said it far away from me.

“Money like that,” I said, “it’s only smart keep it in your shoe. Your sock, even.”

“Henry,” he said. Henry is my name.

“Hang on a second,” I said. I turned away down the creek to where I thrown the hammer. I tried not to look at my church pants because they was ruined either way and I done what I done. There was frogs starting to crawl back on the rocks.

“I got to concentrate,” I said. “This one’s for twenty-five dollars.”

There is a small one with the sand settling out of the water and getting stuck to his legs. I watch him over top of the hammer until he is just a color that I can see. My hand is steady now right to the center of him.

“All right,” Caleb says, and I hope to God that I miss.

THE OFF SWITCH

There was a little extra money in July so Annette bought her son a shirt—the Western kind with mother-of-pear buttons like Earl favored, red. She thought a Western shirt looked good on a man. Annette hoped that at fourteen the boy might take enough interest in looking good that he'd try it on. She sat in the car and unpinned the shirt so that he would have as little time as possible to think about it. Earl's Ranger ticked sleepily in the driveway beside her.

The boy was not doing well and only one thing could explain it. Shortly after Earl moved in the school started calling, usually around three to say they were keeping the boy late. Now they called in the mornings when Annette was at work, asking her to come pick him up. Annette didn't like it. She wasn't supposed to get calls at work and the school secretary took a tone. And that was her son, slouching around like a thug and slapping the other sons across the mouth.

Maybe the shirt wasn't such a hot idea when she thought about it but it was something. She walked into the house holding it out in front of her, checking for stains and irregularities that the boy could use as an excuse, and she told Earl to wait in the kitchen. Just his presence would be endorsement enough to queer the operation. But when she brought the shirt upstairs it was obvious to the boy what she was doing. Everything she did was obviously an attempt to mollify him toward Earl, and he turned away from her as soon as he saw the mother-of-pearl buttons. He did them up to please her, avoiding her eyes in the mirror.

The shirt was too small. The boy was big for his age—big for any age, really—and it bunched under his arms and drew across his chest in a way that was not, as Annette put it, flattering. He stomped down the stairs with his head low, peeling off the shirt as he went and tossing it on the kitchen table next to Earl's coffee.

“Maybe it'll fit you, Earl.”

The boy had developed this way of saying his name. He put a pop and twang in it like the sound of spring doorstop. Earl did not think it was respectful. The boy had worked himself into a lather getting the shirt off and Earl could see dimples puckering under his pectoral muscles as he breathed. Thick, singular hairs grew out of the boy's chin. Earl believed that if he once allowed himself to think of the boy as a sarcastic fat kid that would be it between them, and he wanted things to work. He also wanted somebody to bust the kid's ass. He thought maybe it should be him.

The boy paused long enough to see that he hadn't thrown the shirt into Earl's coffee and then he stomped off into the garage. The door slammed and there was quiet a

few seconds, then the familiar clacking of the weight bench. He listened to the clacks and tried to figure if the boy was putting up more weight in there by the sound of them.

“I bet we can exchange it,” Annette said. She picked up the shirt and folded it in the air in front of her, holding the pins in her mouth.

“How much did it cost?” Earl said. Annette said thirty-two dollars and Earl said Jesus.

“Jesus what?” Annette said. She stopped folding the shirt and looked at him sharply.

Earl was not going to answer that. He knew better than to set himself against the boy in Annette’s mind. He was lucky to be with her—an older woman still in her prime who knew from experience how not to do things—and he intended to be careful. They met at AA. He associated her with the clean, guiltless feeling he first got from drinking, and then could only get back by quitting drinking.

“Do you think it’s possible,” he said, “that the style of the shirt has influenced his opinion?”

“It’s too small,” Annette said. “What he thinks don’t make it any smaller.”

Earl nodded and drank his coffee. She fished the bag with the receipt in it out of the garbage while they listened to the boy grunt and hold his breath in the garage. There was a clang and then nothing and then the grunting and spitting again.

“You know,” Earl said quietly, “I could go in there and put that shirt on him.”

“Are you stupid?” Annette said. She put her hands up in the air and then quickly down again. “What’ll that teach him? What’s he gonna do at school tomorrow?”

“No,” Earl said. “I am not stupid.”

“Jesus,” she said. “Jesus Christ.” She looked away into the living room and shook her head.

“I’m not stupid,” Earl said. “I am trying to think of what would be good for him.”

“How many kids you got?” Annette said. “How many times have you been married?”

Well, Earl thought, that would be zero and never. He was twenty-seven and Annette was thirty-three and that was a difference between them. He didn’t bring it up but she did, usually in situations like this. He knew it wasn’t fair. Earl had not started any families at age nineteen, nor had he filed for any divorces. But he’d grown up with a stepfather, whom he stopped hating after he lost his virginity. The boy didn’t seem to be headed that way anytime soon.

I am not the boy’s stepfather, Earl thought. I might never be. He was angry now and he sat quiet and counted his breaths until it went away.

“How about,” he said, “I take that shirt back to Penney’s and trade it for a bigger one?”

Annette said all right. It got him out the door and into his truck, which was a good place for him right now in her opinion. She could spit. There was nothing to do when he got like this, when he started arguing by agreeing with her. He’d go exchange that shirt. Then he’d come back and the boy still wouldn’t wear it and Earl could be right. Well, good for him. He’d have a fine life, being right all the time and not caring enough to stay and argue.

He’d left his dirty coffee cup at the table. She went to the sink to wash it out but then she stopped. She realized that was something she never would have done, washed

out his cup after he'd left it there, back when she was young and pretty and drinking. She imagined herself charging out the door and bouncing the mug off the windshield of the Ranger as Earl backed down the driveway. Would he stop? Would he get out right away and walk to her or would he drive the truck back up?

The first time Roger left she stood on the porch and screamed at him until she coughed and threw up in the juniper bush. They were always crying or fucking. Everything mattered: tone of voice, who slept facing whom. One time they argued about who left the garage door open all night and she slapped him across the mouth. She never wanted to hit Earl. Of course she wasn't drinking now.

Earl was so much younger than her. She suspected him of thinking that she had been a real beauty, once, and now he got pride of ownership without having to put up with the actual looks. Or maybe he loved her and she could think it though enough to fuck it up. She set the dirty mug back on the table and listened to her son clack and moan in the garage. The weights clanged to rest and he breathed slow and deliberately, mumbling something motivational that she could not quite make out.

There was a smell in the Ranger on the way to JC Penney. It was a smell Earl recognized, blowing past him when the boy burst out of the garage, and he brought the bag to his nose and breathed deeply to make sure. He about gagged. No Penney's clerk would take that back unless the place was being painted.

Annette couldn't be mad at him if he brought the shirt back to the house. If it was anybody's fault it would be the boy, with her a close second. Earl would just be the third party, the guy who lived there and tried to make things right. But didn't. He put his blinker on and then turned it off again. It wasn't even his kid. He was twenty-seven

years old and managing the mistakes from when Annette was his age, the same mistakes she held over him for not making. He rolled down the windows and kept driving to Penney's.

Earl held the bag open at his waist while he stood in the Customer Service line, to keep the smell from building up. The clerk was about his age, with brown hair twisted up behind her head and stuck through with a pencil, and she checked the receipt through what appeared to be plain-glass eyeglasses. She had a crooked mouth. He thought that was nice for a clerk. When she took out the shirt to refold it she paused, bit her lip and then put it back in the bag. She said she was sorry but JC Penney would not be able to make an exchange.

"Why is that?" Earl said.

"The shirt is, um, damaged," the clerk said.

"It's got the tags still on," Earl said.

"The shirt retains a personal odor," the clerk said. She glanced at Earl's mother-of-pearl buttons and offered to let him speak to a manager.

He did not have thirty-two dollars for another shirt. He had his money and Annette had hers and this week he had other obligations. He told the manager the shirt had only been worn once—not even worn, tried on—and obviously there was some misunderstanding.

"Obviously there is," the manager said. He was just a kid, three or four years younger in one of those shiny button-ups from the Big & Tall section. He must have been six foot five. The clerk spoke to him quietly, the two of them turned away. The

manager put his hand on her back while they talked. He came back to the counter, opened the bag and quickly closed it again.

“We won’t be exchanging this shirt,” he said. When Earl started to talk he said it again: JC Penney would not be exchanging the shirt. Earl’s palms felt slimy on the glass countertop. There was a laminated sign next to the register that said Open a Penney’s Charge Account Today!

“What if I opened a charge account?” he said.

“We still wouldn’t take the shirt,” the manager said.

Earl said he thought that was probably the case and could he please open a charge account and use it to buy a new shirt. Or even some other item sold at JC Penney’s. The manager’s face didn’t change but it set up into one expression in a way that Earl found satisfying.

“Claire can help you fill out the form,” the manager said. He walked away and stood at another counter, where he did nothing. The clerk peeled a form off of a pad of them printed in maroon ink.

“Claire,” Earl said. “That’s my girlfriend’s name.”

The clerk made a little hmm noise and looked at the cash register. Earl filled out the form, his middle name and address and phone number. Under occupation he put “self.” He framed houses for SKT Construction but he was hoping to get some freelance work later in the summer. He signed the form and pushed it across the counter to the clerk, who asked him to please wait there. She came back with the manager.

“I’m sorry,” he looked down at the form, “Earl, but you’ll need to be employed to open a Penney’s charge account.”

“I work for SKT,” Earl said. “I just—” He didn’t know what to say for a second. “I just put ‘self’ there. But I work for SKT.”

The manager took a deep breath. “Okay,” he said. “We’ll run a credit check and mail you a card in a few weeks. Or call you.”

“The sign says open a charge account today,” Earl said.

“Yeah,” the manager said. “Yes, well sometimes we run a credit check and then we open the account. Or call you.”

“That’s not fair,” Earl said, and as soon as it came out of his mouth he was angry with himself. Fair. It was how he talked when he was drinking, back when he was put upon by everybody and nothing was his fault. Earl pushed the shirt off the edge of the counter and walked away. When the manager called after him he didn’t turn around.

He wandered Penney’s until he found the section with the Western shirts. An old man in a three-piece suit smiled at him from behind the register, and Earl pretended to look at belts until he started sorting hangers. Then he picked up one of the shirts and walked away. He walked out of JC Penney holding the shirt in front of him with both hands and then he was in the sunny parking lot. It was the first time he had ever stolen anything, besides beer when he was a kid. He couldn’t decide if it felt good or not. Earl drove home just under the speed limit, staying in one lane and checking the mirror every few seconds. He tried not to look at the shirt.

When he got home Annette called the boy upstairs to try it on. Earl watched from the doorframe as she pulled the pins and shook out the new shirt in front of her. When the boy put it on it bunched under the arms and strained across his chest. He yanked

open the snaps and walked out of the shirt and the room as Annette held onto the collar. Earl tried not to smell him as he brushed by.

“It’s the same size, Earl,” Annette said. She held out the tag as if he could read it from across the room. “Where’s the receipt?”

“They didn’t give me one.”

“They didn’t give you one?” Annette said. “The receipt came out the cash register and that clerk, he just threw it in the garbage.”

“It was a she,” Earl said.

“It was a she,” Annette said. She shook her head. “So I was wrong about that.”

“I wish you wouldn’t shake your head,” Earl said. She crossed her arms and turned half away from him. When he looked at her in the mirror she lowered her eyes and picked her teeth with one of the shirtpins.

“You shake your head like that,” Earl said, “it just.” He couldn’t figure out what it did to him so he went over there. He laid his hand over the back of her hand and moved the shirtpin away from her mouth. “Don’t do that,” he said. “You’re gonna hurt yourself.”

“That’s a thirty-two dollar shirt,” Annette said. She started to shake her head and stopped. “That shirt cost thirty-two dollars.”

“Well,” Earl said. “It’s not going back.”

“Does it fit you?” Annette said.

Earl took off his shirt and put on the new one. It was a little tight across the shoulders but it would loosen up.

“Looks good,” Annette said. She sort of laughed.

“He’s bigger than me?” Earl said. “Jesus, is that boy bigger than me?”

He wanted to kiss her but he wasn’t sure if she would let him. They both looked at Earl in the shirt and the two of them next to each other in the mirror. Annette looked like she was about to say something and then somebody was pounding on the front door, hard enough to rattle the glass.

“Mr. Stevens!” The voice sounded small and muffled coming from outside. Earl thought that made it sound more determined, somehow. “Mr. Stevens, this is Brad. From Penney’s.”

“Who is Brad?” Annette said.

It was the manager. He kept pounding on the door even after Earl was standing in front of it. When he saw that Earl was wearing the shirt he said, “Oh, that’s perfect.”

“Go away,” Earl said.

“I want that shirt,” the manager said. He had taken off his shiny button-down and he had on a t-shirt that said Woody’s Board Shop. “You give me that shirt and then you’re gonna come with me.”

The boy came out of the garage and stood in the hallway. Earl could feel him watching. Annette told him to go back but he didn’t. When the manager put his hand on the doorknob Earl took a step forward.

“Don’t do that,” he said. He wondered why the manager hadn’t brought anyone with him—cops or a store detective or something. In the t-shirt he just looked like a kid with an idea.

“Get off my porch,” Earl said. “You get in your car and go home.”

The manger started to turn the knob and that was it. Earl opened the door into him, backing him off the porch, and he kept moving toward him until they were both standing on the lawn. When he didn't hear the door slam he glanced behind him, just for a second. There was the boy.

"Look at you," the manager said. "A grown man—"

Earl punched him in the mouth. He wanted a right cross but there was a dry heat in his stomach and he wound up just pushing his hand forward as fast as he could. Annette said "Oh!" and slapped the doorframe. The manager took a step backwards and sat down in the grass.

"Don't say anything," Earl said. "Get in the car."

The manager was breathing fast in shallow little gasps and his hands were shaking. Possibly he had never been hit before. Go on, Earl thought. He hoped to God he wouldn't get up and come after him. The manager put his fingers in his mouth.

"Show me your teeth," Earl said. The manager shook his head. "Just open your mouth and show them to me."

The manager pulled his lips back a little. There was blood but all his teeth were there and the same shape as before.

"You're fine," Earl said. "They're all fine. Just move back a little and get then get in your car."

The manager stood up, holding out his hands like he was balancing on something. He got in his car, a little Honda with adhesive tint on the windows, and after a second he started it up and drove away. As he went the boy came and stood next to Earl on the lawn.

“With people,” Earl said, “the off switch is generally located on the face.”

The boy turned around and went inside. Annette stepped sideways to let him pass and then she was behind the door again, watching Earl. He walked toward the porch, suddenly tired and thick-feeling.

“Don’t you come in here,” Annette said.

He stood on the lawn a second and then he got into the Ranger. He started it up and jabbed the cigarette lighter into the dash. He sat in the cab and watched Annette watch him from behind the front door. When the lighter popped out he stepped on the clutch and let the Ranger roll backwards down the driveway. He turned a wide arc into the street and let it keep rolling to the bottom of the block. He lit a Kool. He thought he might see how far he could take the truck rolling but there were hills both sides of him now so he put it in first and ran the Ranger up hard to the top of the next street without changing gears. He revved the engine in neutral and popped the clutch. The Ranger barked and feinted sideways under him before the wheels caught. He made it up to fifty-three before he’d circuited the block. He coasted to the house again, eased up the driveway and finished the Kool with the engine ticking in front of him.

He went inside to the kitchen. His dirty coffee mug was on the table and he could hear the clack of the weight bench from the garage. He rinsed his mug in the sink. Annette came to stand behind him and she pressed her head against his back, arms around his chest. Earl felt a panicked rush of claustrophobia and then he was with her again, hot water coursing over his hands.

They boy lay on his weight bench and listened to them argue through the door. He didn’t make out much but his mother’s insistence and Earl’s put-upon drone. He

realized that he knew what Earl was saying without hearing any words. Just from the intonations he recognized familiar phrases from his own arguments with his mother. Tactics. It made him uncomfortable to think that they had learned to patronize her the same way, that just living together they had developed that intimacy. He shut his eyes so he wouldn't keep looking at the door. It was like he had caught Earl coming out of the shower.

He fell asleep that way, on his weight bench, and when he woke up the house was quiet. He went into the kitchen. There was a note taped to the refrigerator, signed by both of them, saying that Earl owed Annette thirty-two dollars. Earl was asleep on the living room sofa. His hand lay sprawled on the carpet, palm up, the perennially torn calluses. It was 5:27am.

Wake up, the boy thought. He watched Earl's pulse beat in his neck. His mouth was open. One of the kids at school fell asleep like this in study hall and when they put a Tic Tac in his mouth he swallowed it without waking. They fed him, maybe a dozen Tic Tacs that he swallowed in his sleep, and after they got tired of it and the kid woke up twenty minutes later everyone knew but him.

The boy stood in the kitchen and listened to Earl breathe. He watched the clock until it changed to 5:28 and then he went upstairs. He stood outside his mother's bedroom until he could hear her breathing as well. Then he went downstairs again and out the front door. He walked down the middle of the empty street through his neighborhood. There were no lights on in any of the houses and he imagined everyone asleep in their beds, the rows of them up either side of the street, breathing slow and arrhythmic. The boy stood in the close July heat, persistent even now, and watched the

darkness bluing in the east. He felt a surge of affection for all of them—his neighborhood, verified and protected by his wakefulness. As he walked back to his house the paper boy pedaled up the hill toward him and they waved to each other without speaking. The paper boy tossed him a Shopper as he passed.

DES MOINES YOU FILIPINO GIRLS

Show-Biz Pizza went totally the fuck out of business because they took out the Tekken machine, I think was the problem. Tekken is awesome. You can be this Chinese monk from olden times who knows kung-fu and despite his Mild Appearance he can kick a guy up in the air and then kick him again as he is falling down, or you can be a bear and bite the monk in the face. Glenn was always the monk and he knew his special move where he goes down into Crane Stance and thinks about the Nature of the Universe for a second and then he shoots forward and jacks your guy in the nuts, but what are you going to do when you are a Chinese Zen monk who has lived a life of goodness and contemplation and then all of a sudden a bear grabs you and eats your face off? You are going to have to put in another quarter and admit that your monk is, in fact, a total fag.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Now that I am fifteen Glenn and I can work Part Time (Seasonal) for DeMielo Construction on the 22nd St. overpass at 6:30am every morning. How can I get up that early and still have time for the Essential Passage of American Adolescence, scheduled for approximately 12am at night in the parking lot behind Kum & Go?

A: You need some Ephedrine.

Q: Where can I get Ephedrine?

A: You can steal it from Glenn's sister, who is a little overweight. By "a little overweight" I mean imagine the Gap if they made not clothes but rather cloth bags for the pressurized storage of Twinkies, and now take one of those bags and feed it still more Twinkies until it starts crying and says it will never be fat again, not ever, and it takes like six Ephedrine and gets a headache and has to lie down for a few hours and then it gets up and has a Twinkie.

Q: When DeMielo lets me off at 10:30am so as not to violate numerous child labor laws, should me and Glenn take a bunch of Ephedrine and ride our bikes over to Show-Biz Pizza, just twitching and speeding out of our gourds and Glenn grinding his teeth like he's racking pool in there, and play Tekken?

A: Yes.

Glenn said Ephedrine is made out of this leaf that comes from Africa and the various warlords and old men in Adidas sweatsuits sit around and chew the leaf all day and they have Weird Speed-Oriented Governments although not Tekken, being disadvantaged African-Africans, but otherwise they are just like Glenn and me at Show-Biz, the moms watched us half-asleep like lions on Nova in their Western Hills Elementary sweatshirts plus jackal packs of birthday parties and the Skee-Ball sirens going off like Air Raid On the Serengeti. Then some of the moms noticed that a lot of Tekken is blood shooting out of people's necks and also there is a girl with a whip, so they complained to the manager and she took Tekken out of there.

“What happened to Tekken,” Glenn said to me.

“What happened to Tekken?” I said to the manager. Her name was Doug, because she was a Filipino girl named after her mother who was also a Filipino girl named after General Douglas MacArthur, Liberator of the Philippines.

“I took it out,” Doug said, “because it was offensive.”

We were already there so we went over to the Gopher Game, which is where plastic gophers come out of holes and you have to hit them with a mallet, but Glenn and me stood on either side of the Gopher Game and hit the gophers with our hands. Doug saw us and she said we had to leave.

“Forever or just today?” Glenn said.

“Just today,” Doug said. “So you learn your lesson.”

“Doug,” I said to Doug, “you are a total fucking faggot and Glenn and me are never coming to Show-Biz Pizza ever again.” Then Doug said she was going to call the police and I said that was a good idea since Glenn and I were not going to be at Show-Biz

when they arrived, and that way Doug and the cops could have an enjoyable afternoon of pizza and pumping each other in the ass.

“Bizzow!” Glenn said.

We went across the street to the parking lot behind Kum & Go and I kept saying “Bizzow!” and we watched a grasshopper that had jumped into a puddle of gasoline. It was rolling over on its side and kicking its own head with its back leg and its wings were melting and making a rainbow in the gas. We watched it until it got dark and Glenn and I were there trying to see into the puddle of gas and Glenn said did it melt or what and I could hear him breathing. Then the lights in the parking lot came on and the grasshopper was still there, kicking itself and with just the skeleton of its wings spread out, and we played Bloody Knuckles for real blood and it was black in the green light and I won and I had maybe the biggest boner of my life. Me and Glenn went behind the air conditioner and we started kissing and jacked each other off and we were sort of wrestling too, and when we were done there was cum and blood on the air conditioner in lines of little dots. We went inside and Glenn said man was it hot in there and I said yeah, I thought it was, and Glenn said the Kum & Go guy should call the air conditioner guy, have him take a look around out back, well we gotta go.

Then for two weeks nothing happened.

Historical Events From the End of June

1) Show-Biz Pizza Goes Totally the Fuck Out of Business

Because they took out the Tekken machine and also some undisclosed young youths took a dump in their dumpster.

2) Glenn's Mom Finds His Sister's Ephedrine, Like Eleven Bottles of It

And she notices that Glenn's sister can't really stop crying ever, and she figures that maybe the two might be connected so she yells at Glenn's sister about Responsible Behavior until she cries even more and then she pours all the bottles of Ephedrine into a plastic shopping bag and gives it to Glenn and says, "Throw this away." Which Glenn does not.

3) World Championship Contest of Who Can Stare At the Sun the Longest

That night Glenn took his sister's jar of spiders and poured them out in the backyard and they wrestled in the grass and bit each other until all of them were dead except for one and he left. We poured the pills into the jar and rode our bikes to the 22nd St. overpass and ate Ephedrine and discussed various issues.

"Where do you think Doug is working now?" Glenn said.

"She's taking time off to accept the Nobel Prize for World-Altering Advances in Faggotry," I said.

"Fagonometry," Glenn said.

He watched down the freeway where the trucks drove over the horizon into a dip in the road and then came up past it and disappeared over the real horizon after that. He chewed on the skin around his fingernails, which he had started to do.

"There's the sun," he said.

It came up low and red over Downtown with the Principal Building in front of it like somebody raising his hand during a filmstrip – one long shadow from Downtown all the way to West Des Moines and the rule was neither of us could be in the shadow and the first one to look away was A Total Pussy.

We hung on the chain link fence they put up to keep people from throwing bricks off the overpass, which I guess if you don't put a fence there people will do, because Des Moines is a place where they want to throw bricks off the overpass bad enough that they're willing to maybe kill somebody, but not so bad that they're willing to climb a fence. We hung on the fence and stared at the sun and the trucks blew by under us revving their engines and jamming on the brakes and then revving their engines again and I had to yell for Glenn to hear me.

“Are you still looking at it?” I said.

“Yeah,” Glenn said. “Jesus.”

“What color is it?” I said.

“White,” Glenn said. “It's bright white.”

It was red like a cigarette lighter and I could hear it cooking my retinas, that sizzling sound inside your head like when you eat Pop Rocks, but apparently Glenn was getting it worse than me. I held onto the fence with one hand and got an Ephedrine out of my pocket and after a few seconds my pupils tightened up and the sun looked brown and dirty and that was how I beat him. My heart banged off the front of my chest like a bird trying to fly through a glass door and it was pussy, blind or heart attack for me.

“I'm going to count to ten,” I said, “and then we'll both look away. One.”

I counted up to nine and stopped and we hung there listening to the engines wind up nervous toward us and then drive by falling like they were disappointed. Then Glenn looked away and so did I.

“Ten,” I said. “You pussy.” He had tears all over his face and when I looked straight at him all I could see was a flat yellow blob.

“My eyes,” Glenn said. “My beautiful blue eyes.”

I kissed him then and I couldn’t stop pushing my face into him and he was giving it back to me hard with his tongue like a hockey fight and salt on his lips and I pushed him back into the chain link fence. It flexed like the two of us were going to fall onto the freeway and I kissed him harder. My eyes were closed and I could still see the sun and even inside my head it was too bright to look at. Then we heard a car door slam behind us and we turned around fast and there was DeMielo, walking toward us without bending his knees and the tendons in his neck getting tighter and tighter like he was reeling in a fish. When he got to us he didn’t know what to do. He took off his orange vest and wadded it up in his hands and then he unwadded it and put it on again.

“What the hell are you boys doing?” he said.

“Construction,” I said.

“You have to go,” DeMielo said. “You have to go right now.”

“Right now?” Glenn said.

“Yes,” DeMielo said. “Right now.”

“Now?” Glenn said.

“Yes, goddammit,” DeMielo said.

We stood there for a while and nobody said anything.

“How about now?” Glenn said.

Then we went to the parking lot behind Kum & Go and we started to engage in The Essential Passage of American Adolescence but then Glenn said he didn’t want to and we stopped.

Four Possible Reasons Why Glenn Would Not Engage In the Essential Passage of American Adolescence In the Parking Lot Behind Kum & Go

- 1) Sometimes Glenn’s sister shows up at Kum & Go around midnight to gas up her Ford Festiva and buy a package of Donette Gems and then walk halfway to the car and turn around and go back inside and return the Donette Gems and get a pack of cigarettes. But that night she didn’t.
- 2) He took too much Ephedrine and it messed him up somehow but I took just as many as he did and by the time we got done playing Bloody Knuckles I was so hard I could have pried open a car door.
- 3) He just didn’t feel like it, which is what he said.
- 4) Something Else.

The next morning we rode our bikes to the place where Show-Biz Pizza used to be and there was a sign that said Loco Joe’s Nickel Arcade and another sign that said Coming Soon. We stood in the parking lot and looked at them.

“Is that a Mexican arcade?” Glenn said.

“Maybe,” I said.

“Loco means crazy,” Glenn said.

We went over and looked in the window and all the games from Show-Biz were shoved over into one corner like they were scared and in the middle of the room there was the Tekken machine, strapped to a hand truck like Hannibal Lecter, and dirt and construction dust on the floor and two tracks in the dirt from the Tekken machine back to the storage room.

“Why would Doug do that?” Glenn said. “Why would you have Tekken and not let anybody play it?”

“Let’s go to Kum & Go,” I said. Glenn kind of danced around in a circle and went over to the door and pulled on it and then he came back and looked through the window again. Then we went to Kum & Go and Glenn got The Hoss which is a 96-ounce Mountain Dew for a dollar, and two straws which you are not supposed to do.

“That’ll be a dollar five,” Doug said.

She looked weird behind the counter with the cigarettes and the cash register where Donkey Kong Classic ought to be. She had a nametag that said “Douglas,” which I didn’t think it was possible but it made her even more of a fag.

“Doug,” I said, “how come you had Tekken the whole time and you never told us?”

“The Tekken machine was off-limits,” Doug said. “It was offensive.”

“We could have played it in the back,” I said. “We would have just gone in the back and played it.”

“You can’t have two straws with the Hoss,” Doug said.

“Who says?” I said.

“The manager,” Doug said.

“Who’s the manager?” I said.

“I’m the manager,” Doug said. Then a guy came out of the cooler and he was wearing a white shirt and the same tie as Doug but he didn’t have a nametag. He walked right around the counter and put his hand on Doug’s shoulder.

“Is there a problem here, Douglas?” he said.

“Fuck you, Doug,” I said. “You manage nothing.”

Then the manager said we had to leave and I said I was just kidding, we were friends of Doug’s from way back, and the manager told Douglas to tell his friends to watch their language in the store or else they couldn’t come visit her anymore, and Glenn said okay, he’d watch his fucking language, and the manager said we had to leave right then no guff. Guff, he said.

“Two straws!” Glenn said from the doorway.

“I get off at six,” Doug said.

We went back across the street and there was a Mayflower moving truck and construction guys in cut-off sweatshirts bringing in more games and Glenn said to one of them was the Tekken machine for sale and he just looked at us and didn’t say anything. At six o’clock Doug came over and Glenn and I were not thrilled about that but she brought us cigarettes, and we stood in the parking lot and smoked Camel Lights and watched them build Loco Joe’s Nickel Arcade.

“I went to one of those in Omaha,” Doug said. “It was gay.”

“You also are gay, Doug,” I said. I took an Ephedrine and Doug said what was that and I said Ephedrine and she said could she have one, and I said yes if you give Glenn five dollars, and Doug said okay and we should do this again tomorrow.

Things We Did to Pass the Days Until Loco Joe’s Opened

- 1) Learned the French Inhale, where you smoke a cigarette and open your mouth and breathe the smoke out of your mouth into your nose and then start coughing harder than you have ever coughed in your life like you are trying to hack up a live piranha, and then puke in the dumpster.
- 2) Examined the grasshopper in the pool of gasoline behind Kum & Go, which all the inside parts of it were dissolved and the legs were like coffee stirrers and the eyes were burnt out but not the covers over the eyes, so you could get down on your hands in the puddle of gasoline and look into its head through the eyes and it was hollow like a soap bubble and you could see the hole in back where its nerves and whatnot used to come in.
- 3) Ate three Ephedrine apiece and took turns wiping our asses on Doug’s five-dollar bill from the day before, and then went inside and got two The Hosses and gave Doug her own ass-infested five dollars and she touched it with her hand and then we had two-ninety in change for when Loco Joe’s opened.

Then one day we were behind the air conditioner getting ready to wipe our asses on Doug's five dollars and I said to Glenn you know what we should do? We should jerk each other off on it.

"That would be an Abuse of Trust," Glenn said.

"We're already wiping our asses on it," I said.

"We would be," Glenn said, "if you'd stop arguing with me."

So I gave him the five dollars and when he put his hands down the back of his pants to wipe it on his ass I kissed him. He hit me in the stomach and I held on to his neck and bit his ear and stuck my tongue in it and I could hear him breathe in fast and his hand opened up on my stomach but then the back door of Kum & Go opened and he pushed me away. Doug was standing in the doorway holding a bag of garbage. She looked at us like we were the new issue of Modern Fag Magazine.

"What are you doing?" she said.

"We're jacking off on your five dollars," I said.

"Nothing," Glenn said. "We're not doing anything."

Doug put the bag of garbage next to the dumpster and went back inside and I could hear her lock the back door. Glenn reached into his pants again and got out the five dollars, watching me. There was blood behind his ear and my tongue was like a wooden spoon.

"Why did you do that?" Glenn said.

I held my hand out for the five dollars and when he came closer to give it to me I kissed him on the neck, in the front of it and his pulse was moving against my tongue and

he grabbed my hair so I kissed him harder but then he twisted my head off of him and pushed me down.

“You can’t just do that,” Glenn said. His neck was red where I kissed him. “You have to do things for a reason.”

I got on my bike and I rode home. I rode down the center of 22nd Street with my front tire between the two yellow lines and the cars on either side of me laying on their horns and I didn’t look up. I could see their side mirrors cutting past me and I imagined one catching the brake cable and whipping me around into the side of the car and then I would roll along the concrete into the next one, but it never happened and the sun was going down.

I tried to go to sleep but I had a headache and the corner of my eye was twitching back toward my ear like something was trying to hatch out of my face and I lay on my back and looked at the ceiling. I could taste licorice even though I hadn’t eaten any and I wanted an Ephedrine but Glenn had all of them. I tried to jerk off but I couldn’t come. Then I got up and found a piece of paper and a pen and I started making lists of everything that happened. I looked at the lists and I thought, all of these things go together. They fit together and there is a reason why they all happened. Then I thought of them fitting together and having curved edges that match each other and spaces between the pieces, and the shape of the space between the pieces and how that was The Shape of the reason why they happened. I started thinking about what The Shape looked like and the edges of everything near each other but not touching, curving around each other, and I was rubbing the tips of my fingers with my thumb feeling my fingerprints. The Shape was like one of my fingerprints with the curves and the lines moving around

each other but still the same distance apart and I thought about The Shape and felt my fingerprints and The Shape curling around the things that happened and my fingers felt wet and I looked down and they were bleeding and I felt dizzy and I tried to stop thinking about The Shape and I couldn't. I closed my eyes and I could still see the lists I wrote down and The Shape and my fingerprints and Glenn's neck with the red mark on it and my blood on the paper in a pool and a grasshopper going into the pool dissolving and its wings melting and just the outside of it left, small and the legs so thin that if you touched one it would cut your fingertip and a grasshopper would crawl into the blood and dissolve down to its thin empty legs and I threw up in the wastebasket.

Then I went to sleep.

Three Things That Happened, One of Which Was a Dream and Not Real

1) Loco Joe's Nickel Arcade stopped Coming Soon and was Open and they had Tekken, which was still awesome.

2) I was the sun and I was setting right on top of the 22nd Street overpass, and everyone in Des Moines was standing on the overpass including Glenn and they were looking up at me but everybody was taking so much Ephedrine that they couldn't see me, they looked right at me and I was crashing down on them and I said look out, Glenn, I am crashing down into the city to burn everything against my will although I am not particularly upset about that, but you should get out of the way. And he just looked up at me until I slid down on top of him and then nothing happened. Nothing at all.

3) I went to the parking lot outside Loco Joe's and saw the sign that said Open and Glenn was there too and we both looked at the sign and didn't say anything and then he gave me an Ephedrine and I said thank you and he said that's okay and then we both went inside.

Loco Joe's Nickel Arcade turned out not to be owned by Mexicans but rather by a Filipino guy named Ramon with his like twenty Filipino daughters, and they all had names like Jemonette or Florita and they were all stuck up, and they sat on a stool by the door and the way it worked was you gave them three dollars and they put a pink paper bracelet on your wrist and then you could play all the games for a nickel apiece, except for Tekken which still cost fifty cents. You would think Loco Joe's would have a Mexican theme which would be funny or at least a Filipino theme which would be better than what they had, which was mostly Moon Patrol and about fifty broken Ms. Pac-Mans, and also next to the Tekken machine this game from five years ago that used to cost a dollar because it was a real three-dimensional hologram that you could only see from one side, and you'd ask the other guys in the arcade, "Hey, what's the hologram game like?" and they would say, "The hologram game is for fags." Doug played it while Glenn and me played Tekken.

We went on like that for maybe three days, wearing pink bracelets and playing Tekken and my fingers were scabbed over and sore unless I took a couple of extra Ephedrine, which I did. Until one day Glenn was the monk and I was the bear and he was going down into Crane Stance to do his Concentrating Nut Rocket Punch and I picked him up and started eating his face, and the way you get out of that is you move the

joystick back and forth as fast as you can and Glenn was doing that, and blood kept shooting out of the monk's neck on account of the bear was eating his face so voraciously, and all of a sudden the joystick broke off right in Glenn's hand.

"Holy crap," Doug said really loud. The joystick was still attached by a bunch of wires and Glenn tried to shove it back into the hole which surprisingly that did not work. We all turned around like the most important thing in the world was to go play Pop-A-Shot Basketball Right Now and Ramon was walking over to see what was wrong. He was short, like maybe five feet tall, and he always had this look in his eyes like he was about to set something on fire, only not in a crazy way but rather because he had carefully considered his options and that was the only thing to do. When he saw the Tekken machine the look got worse.

"Did you do this?" he said.

"The Tekken machine was like this when we got here," Glenn said. Ramon picked up the joystick and looked at the wires.

"Does it still take quarters?" he said.

"Probably," Glenn said.

"Put a quarter in there," Ramon said. He smiled like he wanted us to try and figure out how many of his front teeth were real, which looked like not a lot of them, and I got a quarter out of my pocket and put it in the Tekken machine and it said Are You Ready?

"Put another one in," Ramon said. He put his hands on Glenn and my shoulders and Glenn was shaking and when he tried to get out a quarter he accidentally turned his

pocket inside out and like a hundred Ephedrine fell out onto the floor, and they bounced off the carpet and rolled around in little circles like hail.

“What are those?” Ramon said.

“Yeah,” Doug said. “What are those?” She started walking away from us but Ramon looked at her and she stopped.

“Those are Ephedrine,” I said.

“Can I have some?” Ramon said.

“Are You Ready?” the Tekken machine said.

“Yes,” I said. “Yes you can.”

“From the pocket,” Ramon said. “Not from the floor.”

How We All Worked at Loco Joe's: A Chronology

Right Then: Doug started screwing around with the Tekken machine and saying Ramon could just reattach the attenuators or something like that and Ramon said did she know computers and I said does an oven know baseball and Ramon said okay, we all go in the back and fix the computer.

Three Hours Later: Doug says she has no fucking idea how to fix the Tekken machine and we argue about whether Ramon will kill us right there in the back room or if he will take us out to the dumpster.

Three Hours and Ten Seconds Later: I go into Ramon's office and give him probably a hundred Ephedrine and say that Doug can fix the Tekken machine but she needs to order a part.

Four Weeks Later: We have been sitting in the back room of Loco Joe's every afternoon for a month trying to put the cover back on the Tekken machine and Doug keeps sending me to the hardware store to get more parts, which when I come back they are not the right ones and she sends me out again, and the guy at the hardware store has started calling me Bud.

By the end of August Doug still hadn't fixed the Tekken machine but she had soldered a bunch of extra parts onto it and when we plugged it in it would go AreAreAreAreAreAreAre and then turn off again, and Doug wouldn't let us touch anything and she kept talking about how she had a Degree In Computer Science so mostly Glenn and I just sat on the floor in front of the utility closet and ate Ephedrine and waited for Ramon to come in and murder us.

"What do you think is in the utility closet?" I said to Glenn.

"Some green stuff and about a hundred mops," Glenn said.

"Really," I said. "That is interesting."

Doug stood up from where she had been soldering the front of the Tekken machine and she set the soldering iron on the floor and the paint on the floor bubbled and a little smoke came up and she said Shit and hung the soldering iron off the joystick. She came over and stood in front of us where we were sitting on the floor in front of the utility closet and she looked at me.

"I need you to go to the hardware store," she said. "I need a rheostat."

"How come I always have to go the hardware store?" I said.

"They know you," Doug said.

“They know me because I always have to go,” I said.

“Which is why you can’t stop now,” Glenn said.

“Really,” I said. “That is interesting.”

I got up and walked out of the back room into the arcade part of Loco Joe’s and past the hologram game and the place where Tekken used to be and up to the front desk and Jemonette on a stool with her head turned away from me. I stopped and looked at the bell hanging off the handle of the door. Then I turned around and walked back to Ramon’s office.

“I think there’s something wrong with your utility closet,” I said to Ramon.

“Is it the mops?” Ramon said. “Did you fuck up the mops?”

“I think you should come look,” I said.

We walked past the hologram game and the place where Tekken used to be and into the back room and there was the soldering iron hanging straight down off the Tekken joystick so hot that it was red and smoking the air around the tip in curved lines the same distance apart but where were Glenn and Doug? Then Ramon opened up the utility closet.

“What is fucking this?” Ramon said.

“Really,” I said. “That is interesting.” Because it was exactly what I thought.

Major Legal Points From *Des Moines vs. Doug and Glenn*

1) When Ramon opened the door to the utility closet Doug had her hand down Glenn’s pants, which in Des Moines that is the difference between misdemeanor

Consorting With a Minor and felony Statutory Rape, and also the difference between Ramon calling the cops and Ramon punching Glenn in the back of the head so hard his tooth chips Doug's tooth and then he calls the cops.

2) Doug, who was looking at Six to Ten for Statutory Rape, told the cops she was an Innocent 22 Year-Old Filipino Girl who was influenced into raping Glenn by Illegal Drugs and she acquired Mercy by testifying where the Illegal Influencing Drugs came from, which was Glenn. Later she was found guilty of being a Total Faggot For Life.

3) I was not mentioned during the trial. I was also not looked at during the trial, or when I went to visit Glenn at Alamosa Juvenile Center and I sat on the other side of a wall of glass with chicken wire in it and picked up an orange phone and I waited for him to pick up the phone on his side of the glass and then I pointed at the phone and looked at him and I watched him stand up and walk back through the green steel door and I listened to my orange phone making no sound at all, not even breathing, not even a hum.

Of course the cops took away all the Ephedrine. That night I didn't sleep and I couldn't stay awake either and I lay on my bed thinking about the grasshopper with its inside burnt through by gasoline and in the morning when the sun came up it was bright white and I thought, this is it, it is too bright and it will burn downtown and at the end of the day it will come down on the 22nd overpass and finish it all. But it didn't, and I stood on the overpass and waited until it was all the way gone over the real horizon and the streetlights kicked on and then I rode my bike to the parking lot behind Kum & Go and I wanted to

find the grasshopper. I thought, that is The Shape. That is the space between the things that happened.

When I got to the parking lot there were two of them. There was another grasshopper that had jumped into the pool of gasoline and he was kicking himself with his back leg and his wings were melted to the carcass of the first grasshopper and he couldn't push himself out. I thought, the grasshoppers are Glenn and me, and then I thought which one them is me and which one of them is Glenn? Who is the one who is burnt through and who is the one stuck and dissolving himself? And while I was thinking about it another grasshopper jumped into the pool on top of the burnt one and the kicking one, and he kicked himself with his back leg and his wings started to dissolve and make a rainbow in the gas, spreading out and melting over the backs of the other two, curling at the ends around their long pulsing spines.

And I waited until a fourth grasshopper fell into the gas, and then a fifth, and when a sixth one came and melted to the other five and kicked and burnt through in the gas I got on my bike and rode across the street and stood in the parking lot of Loco Joe's Nickel Arcade. I watched the lights and the Filipino girls through the windows and it reminded me of what it was like to be fifteen and it was no good to me at all, being fifteen at this particular point in time.

ALL THESE THINGS I DO, I DO FOR LOVE

Saturday morning the house was sunny and quiet and Moira had left without waking him up. Doctor Kurtzmann rolled to the center of their bed, where Moira's bare pillow smelled like sorghum. Two people who wanted to stay out of an argument could agree that she was only being considerate. Was that what they did now?

There was a note on the kitchen counter:

Morris,

Left for Indianapolis 6:30. Will call when I get there. Don't forget to pick up Knaacks' present at engravers. I know you will.

He read it twice. It was possible she was saying that she knew he *would* go to the engravers. The adhesive part of the Post-It had curled away from the countertop in the

heat. Doctor Kurtzmann ran his finger across it to stick it down again and it cut him. He stuck his finger in his mouth and tried not to read anything into it. For the first time, it felt like a violated marriage.

Dakota Lee was thirty years younger and she tended to let her mouth hang open during sex. Something about her was hotflash dirty and Dr. Kurtzmann thought maybe it had to do with the mouth thing—that combination of focus and detachment. She'd look at him the whole time like a dog locked in a running car. And Jesus, the mouth on her. Moira had a mouth but she had to work at it and she wound up sounding like a girl in a stag film. Dakota just said things. "Get it in quick," she said once, "before I'm ready." She sent him, even from across the road when he was standing in his kitchen. Moira's kitchen, too. He read the note again. Dakota lived across the road with her brother Derek. Doctor Kurtzmann wanted things to keep over there.

He went out the front door. It was like opening an oven and the gravel road glared white. Eight-thirty and already too hot. Initially fucking Dakota was a moral problem. It was adultery and he'd lied by omission but he was not, fundamentally, a liar. He refused to live the liar's lonely, separated life. Guilty was one thing but here was Moira disappointed with him in advance, as much as saying he'd become unreliable. That wasn't Dr. Kurtzmann and he wouldn't let it be. He crossed the road and went around to the back of Dakota's house, walking fast, set to change something he didn't know what.

Dakota was sitting on the steps, smoking a cigarette next to the bicycle that was locked to the railing when they bought the place. She didn't see him at first and he

watched her watch the blasted fields, the volunteer sorghum and loose grass. She had that look. Doctor Kurtzmann said they needed to talk and she sat up and crossed her legs.

“Derek’s down to True-Value,” she said. “He’s been gone a while.”

“He say when he’s coming back?”

“He left a whole itinerary,” Dakota said. “Told me set the egg timer.”

Punchy. She spun the wheel of the bicycle and Dr. Kurtzmann said he’d come back later. Her expression stayed the same but she ashed her cigarette twice without taking a drag.

“How long’s it take to talk?” Dakota said. Doctor Kurtzmann said he didn’t want to be interrupted, was all, and Dakota leered and said she bet.

“Can I come back tonight?” Dr. Kurtzmann said.

“I’ll be right here,” Dakota said. “Thinking about what you come over for.”

That was a hell of a thing to say and she just sat there blinking at him. Talking to her when she got like this was like bidding a damn hand of bridge. He had to guess what she wanted while she sat there and made accusations.

“Who are you talking to right now?” Dr. Kurtzmann said.

“Morris,” Dakota drew up. “Jesus Morris, I’m kidding.”

She looked hurt for real and Dr. Kurtzmann immediately felt guilty. He had made the least charitable assessment. This is how it will be, he thought. Lie long enough and you will start to resent her. Everything you say to her will remind you of what you are.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“It’s all right,” Dakota said. “Just don’t be touchy. You come over later and we’ll talk all you want.”

She closed her eyes and stuck out her head to be kissed. Doctor Kurtzmann looked at County 31 back of the fields, hawks circling and a rooster tail of dust. He kissed Dakota and went back across the road.

Something had cropped Moira's tomato plants out front of the house. Deer were thick this year, developed out of the woods and down into the fields. Sheaves of dried mud lay broken in the flower bed like in a paddock. Doctor Kurtzmann heard Derek's truck stop on the road behind him. He waved and Derek said howdy and Dr. Kurtzmann said what did he have there?

"Jacks," Derek said. "I'm a put up that end of the house, maybe reframe it entirely."

Their house was a pre-fab job and one end had sunk, so that it looked like it was slouching. It galled Derek—he said it made the place look white trash. Doctor Kurtzmann said he didn't know Derek was a carpenter. Derek wiped his mouth and said he wasn't but he had confidence. He grinned and spat into a styrofoam cup.

"I used to feel like a fuckup, to be honest," he said. "You own your own place, though, you feel like you can do something."

Doctor Kurtzmann said he knew how that was. He wished Derek luck and watched him head for the back pasture with tanks of anhydrous pinging against the jacks, driving toward the mysterious shacks that were a mystery to anyone who'd never heard of amphetamines. Dakota's room was on the low end of the house. Doctor Kurtzmann had her against the wall there three weeks earlier, rising up on the balls of his feet to compensate for the slope. Dakota had never been to his house, for obvious reasons. He

knew her house and his; he knew Moira and her, and he was the only one. It made him feel profoundly lonely.

So he got in the car. He figured it was like this: he'd thought Dakota was accusing him of coming over just for sex because on one level that was what he was doing; it hurt him because on another level there was more. What it was was he loved her, or at least he was headed that way, and it was stupid to pretend otherwise. He drove to Rock Island. There was a jeweler there where he could be sure not to run into anyone, and for three hundred dollars he got a white gold band with a sapphire set in it. The first night he and Dakota made love he'd lain in her narrow bed and said that her eyes were "not just blue—sapphire." In fact they were hazel. It became a running joke between them—especially once they'd kept on for a while—and that was the difference between her and Moira, that willingness to pass up an argument. Doctor Kurtzmann figured that ought to be rewarded. He let the jeweler keep the box and drove home with the ring in his pocket.

Immediately he felt better. He didn't just have his violated marriage and a string of violations; he had made what he had with Dakota into something more human than that, and if he had foxed things with Moira it was not from absence of love but excess. As a man at least he was capable of that. He drove home feeling like he had been acquitted of the worst accusation.

There was a full moon that night. Everything seemed clean and brightly lit and Dr. Kurtzmann cast a second, washed-out shadow as he crossed the road. He sat on Dakota's bed in the dark and put the ring on her finger without saying anything. She squealed and covered her mouth. Doctor Kurtzmann covered her mouth, too, and he kept

it there even after it was clear Derek hadn't woken up, and that led to the kind of sex Dakota seemed particularly to enjoy. She lay her hand on his neck and Dr. Kurtzmann felt the warming ring fade against his skin.

"I love you," she whispered.

That was clearly a young girl caught in the moment. A weaker man—an irresponsible man—would have said it back without thinking, but Dr. Kurtzmann kissed her and rolled her on top of him, silent. That's how he would navigate this: honest, nothing between them that wasn't one hundred percent true. Her mouth dropped open and Dr. Kurtzmann understood it. He thought he might be wearing the same expression during the moments of guiltless, hope-fueled fucking just before Dakota cracked his pelvis.

"Jesus," Dr. Kurtzmann said.

"Yeah huh?" Dakota said. She put her fingers in his mouth and started making the kind of noises that might coax a puppy out from under the sofa. Doctor Kurtzmann had to say Jesus again, louder than he liked to this time of night, and grab her hips to get her to stop bouncing around.

"I did something," he whispered. Dakota rolled off him and lay with her hands over herself—her *personal area*, she called it. His GP had told him to take calcium. When he said he was already taking calcium the GP said take more, don't do anything stupid. This seemed pretty damn stupid. He had the cold, open sense of calm that immediately follows a terrible mistake.

"I am seriously injured," he whispered. "I have to go home right now."

At first he thought she hadn't heard him. She stared out the window over his shoulder, the blue fields of ammoniac sorghum. Then she rolled over to face the wall, winding the sheets around her.

"Fine," she said.

Doctor Kurtzmann's pelvis felt like it had been creased and ironed and it was a breathing trick to not get angry. He touched her shoulder and she jerked away.

"It's fine," she whispered. "You quit you wanna quit."

Clearly it was not fine but when he said her name she shushed him. Secrecy was half the problem here. Moira he could grab that sheet and yank her over, make her drive him to the hospital and see how petty she was acting. He couldn't take Dakota to the grocery store. Everything they did was in private and that gave a tantrum too much authority. It was the opposite of keeping up appearances. He didn't know how to deal with a woman who couldn't be accused of faking anything.

"I need to seek medical attention for my serious injury," he whispered. "That is why I have to leave."

She stripped off the ring without rolling over and threw it on the carpet. That was pure theatrics, completely out of line. Doctor Kurtzmann swung both legs off the bed and reached for the ring. A white line of pain shot from his hips to just behind his ear. When he stood up it was only worse and he fell against the wall, his hand thumping loudly against the wood paneling. Dakota shot up in bed like a mousetrap. They held their breaths and listened to night frogs measure the fields.

"Are you going to pick it up?" Dr. Kurtzmann whispered. "That gift I gave you, are you going to pick it up after you threw it on the ground?"

Dakota glared.

“What happens tomorrow?” he whispered. “How about when Derek Lee comes in here, says whose ring is this on the floor?”

“Who?” Dakota whispered.

“Derek Lee,” he said. “What’s your brother going to do, he finds out I broke my pelvis humping his sister?”

“Derek Rogers,” Dakota whispered. She pulled on her t-shirt and sat for a second with her palms up. Then she got out of bed and opened the door to the hall. “My name is Dakota Lee Rogers,” she said.

Well, Dr. Kurtzmann did not know that. She was Dakota Lee when they met and he was not in the habit of asking people their names once he already knew them. Things were well foxed now. He reached down again and there was a flash of light and a taste in his mouth like very old ice. He pointed to the ring on the floor.

Well, get it, Dakota mouthed.

Doctor Kurtzmann mouthed *I can’t* and Dakota mouthed *What?* And Dr. Kurtzmann mouthed *I can’t bend down to get your ring because you broke my goddamn pelvis* and Dakota held up one finger and froze. Doctor Kurtzmann listened intently down the hall. He could feel his pulse beating in his neck.

Okay, Dakota mouthed, *what?*

“Please hand me the ring,” Dr. Kurtzmann said. “And my pants.”

She gave him his pants and dropped the ring in his hand without touching him. Then she went back to standing by the door. The ring in his hand felt neither warm nor cold and Dr. Kurtzmann wondered if they’d worked themselves up to the same

temperature or if it had cooled on the floor to match him. He tried to pull his pants on but standing on one leg was impossible. He wound up holding them in front of him as he hobbled through the door.

“Like a paper doll,” Dakota said. Her face was completely uninflected and Dr Kurtzmann realized with a lurch that it was a skill she’d picked up, to not show any hurt when something like this happened.

“I’m coming back,” he said. “I love you.”

She walked back to her bed and lay down mechanically. Doctor Kurtzmann watched her from the doorway a few seconds before he hobbled down the hall.

The back steps were a rodeo and the quarter mile from there to the road took him twenty minutes. He stopped to rest against the Lee mailbox—the Rogers mailbox. He watched his porch light shimmer and realized that his eyes were watering. The moon was still high and bright and the pin oaks prodded black shapes around his lawn.

There was an elk in Dr. Kurtzmann’s flower bed.

He thought at first that it had to be an enormous deer—mutated on growth-additive sorghum and wandered up from the river, and he tried staring until it became that. But it was shaggy and built too long, and its antlers were thick and sharp in a way that made a deer’s look like filigree. Doctor Kurtzmann had never seen an elk. He was still holding his pants in front of him—like a cape, he thought stupidly—and he stepped into the road. The gravel crunched and the elk stopped cropping tomato plants to look at him. Its eyes were like cans of shoe polish. It shook its antlers and walked toward him.

Doctor Kurtzmann stood motionless. At the ditch before the road the elk paused and then craned its neck to one side so look at him with its other eye. It stared,

depthlessly stupid. Then it loped down into the ditch—stumbling on the descent and lunging to haul itself up the other side as if it weren't used to its size, either—and stopped a few feet from Dr. Kurtzmann in the road. The elk reeked. It watched him without moving and Dr. Kurtzmann realized he had no understanding of why it might attack him or wander away, what would prompt it now to do anything. All that power, mute and stupid. The thought of it made Dr. Kurtzmann suddenly angry and he stepped forward.

“All these things I do,” he said, “I do for love.”

The elk lunged away from him and heaved itself through the ditch. It galloped across the lawn and out into the fields, the locusts stuttering into silence as it passed. Doctor Kurtzmann watched it disappear with a strange sense of accomplishment.

He walked across the road to his car in the driveway. He opened the door and lowered himself into the driver's seat with one hand on the steering wheel and one on the frame. The leather was cold against his bare legs.

“Shit,” he said. His pants pockets were empty. The keys were likely on Dakota's floor right now and her asleep with the door open, waiting for Derek to come in and see the big carved Mercedes ignition sticking up next to his sister's panties. Doctor Kurtzmann was still clutching the ring. He set it on the dashboard and looked up through the windshield while he rubbed his cramped hand. For a second he allowed himself to feel a profound sense of personal injustice. Then he pulled himself out of the car again and slammed the door.

Pulled himself out of the car, hit the power locks and slammed the door. Jesus.

The ring looked up at him from the dashboard and he thought about finding a rock. But that would only be one more thing to explain and he was tired. He went into

the house and hung his pants over a kitchen chair. Then he lay down on the davenport and pictured the ring, waiting there patiently for Moira to come back from Indianapolis. All that power, mute and stupid. He fell asleep listening to bats fly between the trees, a sound like someone rifling a purse.

Moira called at seven fifteen. She'd left early and just crossed over from Illinois, after finding herself unable to spend one more minute with her sister—who was once again dating the same semi-retired contractor and who had no idea what she was doing to her life. With her life. Moira was in a state and she kept interrupting herself to talk back to the radio.

“I cracked my pelvis,” Dr. Kurtzmann said.

“Jesus,” she said. “Morris, how would you do that?”

“An elk,” he said. “I was attacked by an elk.”

The phone hissed emptily.

“Moira?” he said.

“I am giving you an opportunity now,” she said, “to tell me the truth.”

In college they made fun of couples like this. Habitual contradictors, Moira called them, people who needed ways to talk to each other more than they needed things to talk about. They doubled once with one of Moira's sorority sisters and she and her boyfriend were at each other relentlessly, all through dinner and in line at the movies afterward. It was like a ventriloquist show. When they were finally free of them, in the front seat of Morris's beater college car, Moira turned to him and said “No, *you're* the dummy!” He slid his hand up the back of her shirt and she clacked her jaw mechanically. She had such epic tits. The wire in a her bra used to put a red trough into his wrist.

“I’d never seen an elk before,” Dr. Kurtzmann said. “It’s been eating our tomato plants.”

He waited for her, nervous for something he wasn’t sure what. The talk radio DJ shouted indignantly in the background. “Moir?” he said.

“I’ll be home in twenty minutes, Morris,” she said. To Dr. Kurtzmann she sounded tired and moving at great speed. His pelvis felt dull and heavy after she hung up, a single hurt now rather than two lobes and a fissure. Derek’s truck passed the front window and trundled off the road toward the back pasture. He could easily be there an hour, and Dr. Kurtzmann rose painfully from the couch. He bit the inside of his cheek and did what he needed to put on his pants.

Dakota’s front door was locked. Doctor Kurtzmann hobbled around to the back steps and dragged his way up by the railing. There was a spacer block where it joined the house and “DR +” was carved into it above a deep white gouge. He looked at it for a long time before he knocked on the storm door.

The glass rattled violently but there was no noise inside. Doctor Kurtzmann cupped his hands and looked in at the orange armchairs in the living room. The television played to an empty Dallas Cowboys jacket. Dakota hated the Cowboys, whom she believed were a team for trash. She made “trash” into a two-syllable word. The Cowboys had not won a Super Bowl since 1996, which Dakota claimed was also the last year poor people bought jackets. IT was the funniest thing she ever said. That night she fell asleep with her mouth open against Dr. Kurtzmann’s wrist, and he spent half an hour wriggling out from under her without waking her up.

There were a few bricks stacked next to the stoop and Dr. Kurtzmann considered putting one through the storm door. He could go in and get his keys and Dakota would know it was him; she wouldn't tell Derek and that would be the end of things between them. The affair would be over with Dr. Kurtzmann the only one hurt by it. Dakota would get over it. She would hate him for a cad in a way that would protect her from actual cads in the future. He liked the idea of it being done now, of going on with Moira again invested fully. He pictured Dakota walking up the steps and seeing the brick lying on the living room carpet, the slivers of glass. There was a rooster tail above the highway and Dr. Kurtzmann hobbled back to his house a few minutes before Moira pulled up.

He stood at the end of the driveway and made her drive him to the hospital immediately, before she could get out of the car. He didn't tell her about the Mercedes keys. The boys at the hospital all knew him and they joked with Moira about putting him out of commission. He didn't say anything about the elk and once he'd been doped up and X-rayed they left him ride home with Moira in silence. She parked behind the Mercedes in the driveway. It was evening again.

"There really was an elk," Dr. Kurtzmann said. Moira shut off the engine.

"Morris," she said, "There was a time when that would have been the more likely explanation." She got out of the car and slammed the door. Doctor Kurtzmann watched her walk into the house without looking at the Mercedes. He got of the car and looked for himself. The ring was gone. The doors were unlocked and the keys were on the dashboard next to a pink envelope.

It was a get-well card. The front was Snoopy lying on his doghouse with a thermometer in his mouth and the inside was Snoopy dancing that scribble-footed Peanuts dance. There was a note.

Now we each of us know what you are, it said.

Doctor Kurtzmann took the keys and folded the card and put it in his pocket. That night, after Moira was asleep on the couch, he took it to the compost heap out back. He could feel the heat radiating off the grass clippings and peels in the dark. A bat stitched a tight eight between the apple trees.

When Dr. Kurtzmann was a kid he used to throw his car keys up in the air and watch the bats follow them down—swooping and veering up from the ground at the last second. He jingled the broad ring of Mercedes keys in his hand and heaved them up as far as he could. The bat flinched and then went about its business. Doctor Kurtzmann listened but he could hear where the keys hit the ground. He heard them jingle off in the scrub oaks and then, bafflingly, they jingled again. He walked a few feet into the dark trees. The keys jingled again and he saw the elk.

It stood half under the canopy of branches, shaking its head. The Mercedes keys were looped over one prong of its antlers. The elk snorted and shook its head and the keys jingled again, like Christmas.

“Moira,” Dr. Kurtzmann said. The kitchen window was open and he hoped she could hear him. “Come look at this.”

The elk dragged its antlers against the ground and the keys slipped off. Doctor Kurtzmann walked slowly forward, his palms up in what he hoped was a nonthreatening

gesture. The elk backed off a few paces and eyed him dumbly. Doctor Kurtzmann picked up the keys and threw them at its antlers again.

“Moira, look,” he said. The keys bounced off its neck and landed in the grass. When Dr. Kurtzmann took a step toward it the elk turned and ran off into the brush, kicking twigs and loose dirt behind it. Doctor Kurtzmann picked up his keys and turned back to his darkened house.

When Moira left the house the next morning Dr. Kurtzmann went across the road. Derek was behind the house, digging under the low end to set the jacks. When he saw Dr. Kurtzmann he put down his shovel and crossed his arms.

“You ever seen an elk?” Dr. Kurtzmann said.

“What?” Derek said.

“There was an elk last night,” Dr. Kurtzmann said. “In my yard.”

“Yeah?” Derek said. He cracked his knuckles. “What was it like?”

“It was big,” Dr. Kurtzmann said. “I didn’t realize how much bigger than a deer.”

Derek said huh and there was a silence before Dr. Kurtzmann said he’d got his card.

“Yeah,” Derek said. “That was Dakota, she wanted to do that. I dunno.”

“Well,” Dr. Kurtzmann said. The two of them looked at each other.

“I’m gonna hit you now,” Derek said. The locusts droned steadily and Dr. Kurtzmann counted the pulses. Each one was another moment of this, of waiting.

“Can I take off my glasses?” he said.

“Yeah,” Derek said. He held out his hand and Dr. Kurtzmann folded his glasses and gave them to him. Derek set them on the steps, under the railing, and then he turned to face Dr. Kurtzmann again and squared his shoulders.